

## MARSHALL MCLUHAN AND THE ELECTRIC AGE

Marshall McLuhan was a famous Canadian intellect of the 1960's who specialized in the study of new media and mass media communications. The main purpose of his study was to provide society with the knowledge of the capabilities of new media technologies and its effects on mankind. McLuhan has been said to be ahead of his time while he was expressing the findings of his study and almost became a sort of prophet for the future of the "Electric Age". Though McLuhan died in the year of 1980, his popularity rose again in the 1990's when the Internet was invented, as it's believed that he predicted it. To truly understand McLuhan one must be aware of the three significant eras in which, McLuhan identifies had led us to our era of the Electric Age, as they had made drastic changes in the evolution of mankind in terms of the history of technology and communication. The starting era in which consist in the Prehistoric times, was the era of the Preliterate Culture. In this era mankind had belonged to a tribal society, where people had to come together in order to share ideas and stories, as they used sounds, facial expressions, emotions, and gestures in order to communicate. This soon changed with the invention of the phonetic alphabet, as instead of using sounds and sights that reflect what we are trying to communicate, we used letters that held no significant meaning or relation to the aspect in which we were trying to communicate (like the word bird has no relation in terms of its visual representation and sound to the animal itself). In this era of the Alphabet Culture, mankind becomes alienated from language, though we still retained some elements of earlier Preliterate Culture as medieval manuscripts were mainly used as they included colorful embroidered images, non-sequential sentences and were purposely read out loud. These aspects allowed mankind to make some connections as they provided a sense

touch, visuals and sound that were meant to be tied together in order to establish meaning and was still being shared communally. Following the era of the alphabet would be the most destructive of all, the era of Print Culture, in which Gutenberg's printing press was invented (1450s) and marked a major revolution. As instead of just having a few finely detailed medieval manuscripts that were to be read out loud and shared, books were being mass-produced, and were to be read by the individual. Sentences were sequential and provided no textures, images or sounds, allowing those who only knew how to read to obtain an understanding. This detribalized people, as face-to-face interaction was no longer necessary to get a message across. The ideology of the printing press also separated people in terms of nationalism as, "print demanded both personal fragmentation and social uniformity, the natural expression of which, was the nation-state" (McLuhan 18). Therefore although the Print Age came with the power of sharing and documenting knowledge in mass means, it came at a cost of internal retreat as the experience becomes more fragmented and we become more detached from our communities and have divided nationally. Now in the Electric Age, a new society is born, in which mankind is disfigured by new media technology, and is transported into an infinite environment of the "Global Village" thus creating positive, negative, and reluctantly violent effects that have truly impacted our society.

The Electric Age began with the discovery of electricity and the creation of the telegraph in the 1830's. Specifically, the telegraph had served as the launch of a new type of communication device, as with its invention came the telephone, the radio, the television, and the computer. These pieces of technology can be tied together as devices of "new electronic media", as they are not used solely for communication purposes but as well as entertainment

and broadcasting tactics, displaying shows, news, and advertisements. Now just like in the previous eras, this profound breakthrough of technology, in turn affects mankind. In the case of the Electric Age rather than being submersed by what these new electronic media devices are communicating (the shows on TV), we are more affected by the actual form of experience it puts us in (engagement of TV). McLuhan refers to these forms of experience as the “medium” of technological devices and it’s where his famous line “the medium is the message” kicks in. New electronic media affects us in a sense that it actually reshapes our bodies and senses, plus extends them beyond our natural human capabilities. Although, as well they can heighten a function of our body part or sense, it can also reduce another. For example the telephone extends our ears and mouth as they can be almost anywhere around the world via the telephone. This means that it also extends our sense of hearing and projects our voice in distances that we would never be able to do alone. As those functions are enhanced, our sense of sight is reduced, as we are only able to communicate with hearing and speech. Our ears and mouths then take on a form of telephone, and therefore reshaped our body part and how our senses are used. Have you ever noticed how many people on the street are constantly on their cellphones, as if it were glued to the side of their faces? Or how the general amount of people would even agree that they couldn’t last one day without their phones? Well this is the effect that telephones and other new electronic media devices have as it’s clearly illustrated that “we become what we behold. We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us.” (McLuhan’s Wake). In this sense we have become dependent on these new media technologies since we have literally made it a part of our being and have allowed ourselves to forget how we were even able to live without it in the past.

Now although it may seem as though the Electric Age has transformed humanity far beyond our past, McLuhan predicted that in the future Electric Age, we would actually see a return, to one of mankind's previous eras of culture. This would be McLuhan's ideology of a "Global Village", where he states that " [In] the global village [mankind] no longer [has] to be anywhere in order to do everything. The same information is available at the same moment from every part of the world" (McLuhan's Wake). Curiously the Internet is almost a perfect representation of this idea of the "Global Village" as this new electric media device would allow a person to travel anywhere in the world through websites and communicate with people through social networks across the globe. There are also ways, in which a person can learn of the culture of another country, even explore foreign cookbooks, join online communal heritage groups, or even attend a birthday party half way around the world with the use of live video streaming. You can almost be at any place in the world at any given time and not only through the Internet but even with the use of the television or radio stations, as we have shows or songs aired from all of the world. Correspondingly with the capabilities of this "Global Village" there is a big shift from the Print culture as, "print [centralized] socially and [fragmented] psychically, whereas the electric media bring[s] man together in a tribal village that is a rich and creative mix, where there is actually more room for creative diversity than within the homogenized mass urban society of Western man" (McLuhan 40). This is why in Electric Age we see a return to the Tribal Culture found in the Prehistoric era of Preliterate Culture as people are retribalizing with the use of the "Global Village". It is a "new" type of tribalism, as instead only being able to share ideas within small groups of tribes/villages, in the Electric Age we are able to communicate worldwide and have the ability to live on a planet that works together as one

village or more appropriately “one city”.

New innovations have always come with its positive and negative effects on mankind. As we’ve seen, the Electric Age has enabled us to enhance our bodies and senses past our human capabilities and regroup the world as a society. Yet, negatively we end up being consumed by our technologies since we become highly dependent on them. Profoundly enough, McLuhan also suggest that there will be violent effects in particular relation to the fact that people will lose themselves in the adaptation of the continuous growth, of electric media present in Electric Age as he says:

“[As men become] tribally metamorphosed by the electric media, we all become Chicken Littles, scurrying around frantically in search of our former identities, and in the process unleash tremendous violence. As the preliterate confronts the literate in the Post-literate area, as new information patterns inundate and uproot the old, mental breakdowns of varying degrees – including the collective nervous breakdowns of whole societies unable to resolve their crises of identity – will become very common” (25).

This process metamorphosed by electric media would the product of the “Global Village” as its growth would leave people dumb-founded. This is because if the planet were joint together under one village, then the mixing of other countries culture, values and attitudes would be infinite; making it difficult to know which one we truly belong to. McLuhan had contemplated that, “when everybody becomes totally involved in everybody, how is one to establish identity? Quest for identity is a central aspect of the electric age. Violence is the only method by which people have ever learned to assert or define identity. Terrorists, hijackers, these are people

minus identity. They are determined to make it somehow, to get coverage. To get noticed” (McLuhan’s Wake). This would be the strive of the individual in the Electric Age with the development of the “Global Village”, and those who are most affected by it would be the youth of this generation. Young adults, teenagers and even children are the ones who not only participate most in this idea of a “Global Village” but have also grown up with new media technologies like the televisions, computers and the Internet, yet they are still caught between the culture of the Print Age and the Electric Age. McLuhan identifies this as not an easy period in which to live in especially for the youth as they are unable to find their identity and in turn resort to violent acts as they feel no one truly understands them and that they don’t belong, “from Tokyo to Paris to Columbia, youth mindlessly acts out its identity quest in the theater of the streets, searching for not goals but for roles, striving for an identity that eludes them” (McLuhan 25). Not only is this a battle between the youth and parents but also between the youth and institutions, since institutions are relentlessly stuck in the teaching methods of the previous age of Print culture. A child of the Electric Age is not used to books or notes as they have grown in a society of new electronic media, needing a method that requires discussion with peers or group projects in which gives off a sense of tribalism. However this has not been encouraged enough in our school systems and is not always given and it is that specific ignorance on which we can thank for the increase of dropouts and rebellions against education.

In McLuhan’s own time he was always criticized on his studies. Many people had argued that his work was not of academic importance or that he was simply invited on talk shows for entertainment purpose. This is why when he first introduced his ideas of the potentially violent effects produced by the Electric Age, people did not quite take his warning seriously and in

fact believed he was merely exaggerating. It may have not been so apparent back then, but I do strongly believe that McLuhan had not exaggerated his beliefs of the potential violence, as there are evident aspects of it seen in society. For one, it has become extremely apparent that we have been entirely consumed by the technology of the Electric Age, from computers and telephones to the television; we can never seem to turn them off. Secondly, the sense of being stuck between two eras of culture has really opened my eyes to reason to why there's such a huge increase in the learning challenges children of the Electric Age face. Being one of them I can argue that it is truly hard for me to pay good attention to textbooks, as I take more out from the participation experience of the TV and therefore learn more from discussions, films or short clips. The last effect I have observed, is the lack of involvement young adults, teenagers, and children of this age have in the real world since they are more interested in taking part of their own world with the use of the internet and online social networks or online gaming. This is due to the fact that online a individual without an identity can create multiple perspectives of him or herself, in order to fill that gap of the unknowing. The last two effects are those of the most violent, as the struggle for identity is a significant problem and can lead the youth of the Electric Age down the wrong path and take part in acts of violence. The scenario could go as follows; a teenager cannot seem to do well in high school and believes that he is stupid, so he drops out. Now he has been shut out of the world of academia as he is no longer a student and is in search of another identity. In search of another identity he meets new people online who are high school dropouts just like him, so he becomes friends with them. He is aware that these people are of a gang and although it is not really the lifestyle he imagined for himself he goes along with them, since he feels neglected by society. He joins the gang and deploys mayhem on

the streets, fulfilling the role he feels gives him an identity, and allows him to be noticed by society. Though this kid actually had a dream of making it big, but he felt as though he wasn't capable of this because he couldn't grasp an true understanding from his textbooks. As McLuhan says, "If we don't adapt our educational system to their needs and values, we will see only more dropouts and more chaos" (29). This is why I don't believe he was exaggerating about the violent effects of the Electric Age since there have been enough evidence to show that it can, and has been happening. The only question left is, if we choose to see it and stop or choose to be blind and ignore it as it continues to cause destruction.

The Electric Age comes with revolutionary effects that are in dire need of our cooperation, as the struggles we face while submersed in this new world can be easily absolved. Yes, the Electric Age has made humans dependent on technologies and has allowed the youth of this generation to suffer an identity loss and rebel with violence but just as McLuhan has never a black or white on technology, we shouldn't as well. Technology and more specifically electric technology have brought us effective and efficient medical care, enabling us to save lives. It has also give us communication devices allowing us to instantaneously reach someone, in the case of an emergency. Most of all with electric technology we expand time and space as "with the kinds of power and energy now available, it is possible to create environments anywhere overnight just by laying on electric lighting. These are environments that alter all human affairs, all human relationships in any part of the world" (McLuhan's Wake). Without electricity we would be constricted to only being able to do things while the sun is up as there would be no source of lighting to allows us to drive cars at night, nevertheless there would be also nothing to do, as the rest of the world would all be sleeping. No, the idea is not



to enter a regression and return to Prehistoric times where men are free to live in his natural surroundings, since humans are obviously capable of much more. The knowledge we acquire was taken from our past and that is how we led up to these great revolutions and inventions that have in fact bettered society. We only got here because we opened our minds to the future and allowed ourselves to breath in the knowledge that is given to us and breath out actions that will put our knowledge into affect. McLuhan stresses that in this electric age:

“If we diagnose what is happening to us, we can reduce the ferocity of the winds of change and bring the best elements of the old visual culture, during this transitional period, into peaceful coexistence with the new retribalized society. If we persist, however, in our conventional rearview-mirror approach to these cataclysmic developments, all of Western culture will be destroyed and swept into the dustbin of history... We live in a transitional era of profound pain and tragic identity quest, but the agony of our age is the labor pain of rebirth” (52).

The age of the “Global Village” is already taking over, as all of our electronic media devices are becoming tuned into every part of the world. The problem however, still exists in our institutions, as we should adapt methods of education suited to this day in age, and encourage teenagers to move forward academically. Secondly, we must educate the youth on effects of media; so that they are able protect themselves against its negative effects and influences. Lastly we must help our youth find who they are and grow individually. These changes are necessary for the future of our society as its success is in the hands of our youth. It is now the time for us to breath in McLuhan, and breath out action for the sake of a happier and healthier civilization.

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