

The Medium is the Message and the Massage: No Kidding

Dr. Harvey Wolf Kushner

Long Island University

@ Email: Harvey.Kushner@liu.edu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8451-1187>

Abstract

Herbert Marshall McLuhan was a Canadian philosopher whose work is among the cornerstones of media theory. His *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *The Medium is the Massage* foretold the consequences of technologies of the new millennium. He tells us that the way we view the world around us depends on the medium being employed. In other words, the form or method of communication shapes how we perceive and understand our surroundings. These viewings create explanations that often appear fool proof or even scientifically accurate. Unfortunately or fortunately as the case might be, they change with the advent of new mediums brought about by technological advance and innovation. We need to heed McLuhan's astute advice that all media work us over completely. In other words, understand that as different media develop so too will our views of all the things that surround us. What we can take for granted is that change is inevitable and brought about more rapidly by the exponential growth of technology.

Keywords

massage, message, media, medium, technology

Introduction

It was the turbulent sixties and I was well on my way to obtaining my doctorate in political science from New York University. During one of my core courses required of all doctoral students, I remember being mesmerized by a charismatic professor from across the pond. This pipe smoking gentleman usually festooned in a well-worn green tweed jacket with brown leather elbow patches would often stray away from the traditional classics of the day that populated every doctoral political science student's scope and methods syllabus (see, for example, Popper, 1959; Van Dyke, 1960, Kuhn, 1962, Marcuse, 1964). Instead, he would introduce us to the newly crafted, albeit edgy, works he thought relevant for the coming millennium. His bone fides added much to his credibility, not mention to his notoriety. He made it well-known that he was descended from the Scottish physician and microbiologist who founded penicillin, Sir Alexander Fleming.

One such mesmerizing presentation was his impassioned introduction into the merits of a newly published monograph that I knew well. Little did I know at that time just how important Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (McLuhan, & Fiore, 1967) would be to my understanding of where we are as we end the first quarter of the first century of the third millennium of the Gregorian calendar.

Perusing the Strand

After hearing my professor waxing so eloquently on McLuhan's work, I jumped into my yellow Ford Thunderbird and headed over to the Strand Bookstore on East 12th Street and Broadway to secure a copy of the book. As a former graphic arts and advertising student at the world famous Parsons School of Design located at that time in the tree lined neighborhood of Sutton Place Park South, I was familiar with the work of McLuhan's coauthor, Quentin Fiore. Fiore, a graphic designer and communications consultant assisted with depicting McLuhan's revolutionary thoughts on media. His powerful layouts helped to bring McLuhan's thoughts alive. Jerome Agel, a longtime collaborator of Fiore and known to many as a cross-disciplinary publishing puppeteer, also helped to bring forth McLuhan's ideas in this 1967 classic. In addition to working with McLuhan, Fiore and Agel helped introduce and popularize the ideas of such luminaries as Carl Sagan, Buckminster Fuller, and the preeminent futurist Herman Kahn, to name a few (see, Sagan, 1973; Fuller et al., 1970; Kahn & Agel, 1973).

You might wonder why I went over to the Strand without consulting the university book store to secure a copy of the McLuhan book. As a former Parsons student and familiar with the likes of Quentin Fiore and other designers of the day, I wanted to peruse the vast collection of graphic design books displayed at the Strand for any relationship to McLuhan. Unlike my fellow political science students at the university, and once employed as a graphic designer

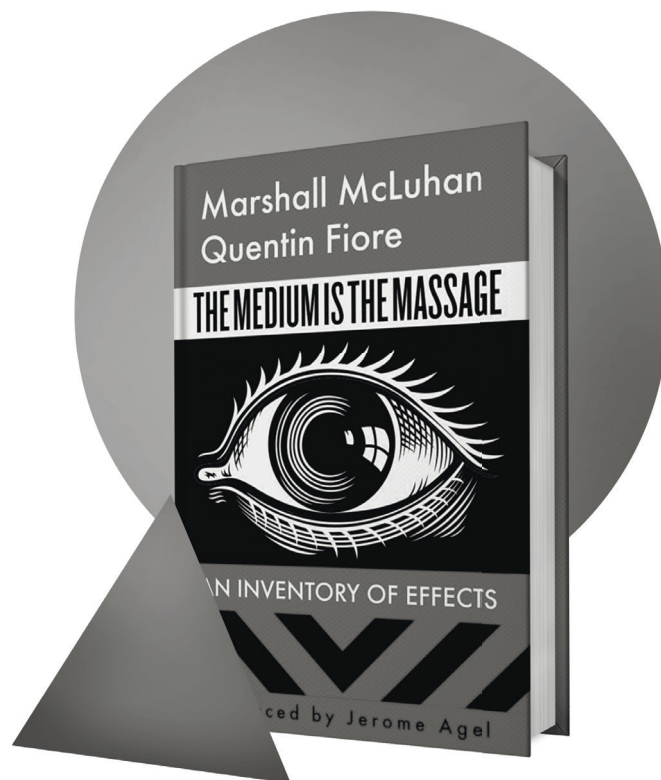


Figure 1: The book cover of *The Medium Is the Massage* by Marshall McLuhan

at the Vogue-Wright Art Studio in charge of depicting women's lingerie in the Montgomery Ward catalog, I was very much familiar with the graphic designs of the 160 page McLuhan work. The latter with its collage style with text superimposed on visual elements and vice versa was a sight to behold and something I studied at Parsons. Pages of the terse volume were left blank and others contained photographs and images that juxtaposed modern and historic images. Some pages were printed backwards so they could be read in a mirror. It was eye candy for those of us familiar with the experimental graphic arts of the day taught at cutting edge art and design colleges like Parsons, but, more than likely, shocking to the unindoctrinated non-art student of the sixties.

Oddly enough, but in keeping with the McLuhan genus, the title of the book *The Medium is the Massage* was a mistake. The typesetter mistook message for massage. When confronted with the error, McLuhan famously stated, "Leave it alone! It's great, and right on target!" The typographical error fit well into his basic narrative, i.e., that all media impact tactility and intellectually. "All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences, they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered" (McLuhan, & Fiore, 1967, p. 26).

Fiore's avant-garde graphic designs and Agel's extraordinary book production talents combined to produce a monograph that clearly illustrated McLuhan's thesis that a medium such as a book produces a massage, or message if you will, that impacts the human sensorium, i.e., those parts of the brain that receive, process, and interpret sensory stimuli. It is where impressions from the external world are perceived and conveyed. And so, the information we come in contact with is massaged and messaged by the medium by which it is delivered to our sensorium.

Research Methodology

The following important points have been taken into consideration in the methodological design of this scientific study. The research methodology corresponds to interdisciplinary studies and is inherently complex, combining the method of social constructivism with other approaches.

The aim is to study the influence of digitalisation and mediatisation on the formation of new types of subjectivity, and explore how these factors are shaping our contemporary world.

Other socio-humanitarian methods, such as comparative analysis, phenomenological interpretation and interpretive analysis, complement this approach and discourse analysis to address the stated research topic.

Discussion

McLuhan: a Modern Day Nostradamus

"Until writing was invented, men lived in acoustic space: boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the mind, in the world of emotion, by primordial intuition, by terror" (McLuhan, & Fiore, 1967, p. 48). Such reasoning implies that the advent of new technologies such as writing or movable type impact how we experience and interpret the world around us. To illustrate, for example, consider being seated in the Roxy Theatre just off Times Square in New York City watching a Pathé newsreel on the cold war. Yes, that is one way in which I experienced and absorbed the news of the day in the late 1940s and early 1950s. To be sure, watching a newsreel at a theatre differs from reading about the event in the *New York Times*.

In other words, the new medium of delivery impacts our understanding of what we experience. It can add or detract from the experience we once had through the lens of the older medium. "Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication" (McLuhan, & Fiore, 1967, p. 8).

McLuhan gives us reason to concern ourselves with the exponential growth of today's social media. In the past, one had to endure the difficulties associated with an apprenticeship to earn their credentials as a fledgling journalist. Today, everyone is a blogger. Software applications on mobile devices like smartphones and tablets allow us to get our thoughts out to a viewing public without making our bones in the Fourth Estate. Such unregulated behavior along with the embedded algorithms of the entities that own these software applications should give us reason to pause. The subject of TikTok and other social media is left for another day. For now, however, digest what McLuhan is telling us about a medium's importance in viewing and understanding our universe. Be aware, however, of the dystopian novel and cautionary tale by English writer George Orwell (1949).

As someone who has lived through numerous large technological advances (handheld calculators to highspeed computers) and small ones as well (Leroy lettering sets to CAD drafting and 3D design software), consider how we will be impacted by future technologies. "The circuited city of the future will not be the huge hunk of concentrated real estate created by the railway. It will take on a totally new meaning under conditions of very rapid movement. It will be an information megalopolis" (McLuhan, & Fiore, 1967, p. 72). One just has to hop an Amtrack train and travel north along New York State's Hudson River and view the remains of factories with their decaying loading docks that were serviced by rail. McLuhan's words illustrated by Fiore's graphics and Agel's production skills illustrate the dynamics of change. The latter brought about by technological advancements that will only witness exponential growth in our new millennium.



Figure 2: The book cover of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* by Marshall McLuhan

It should be noted that prior his collaboration with Fiore and Agel, McLuhan published the novel *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (McLuhan, 1962) that foretold his thoughts he would write about in *The Medium is the Massage*. In it, he argued that human history could be divided into four different chapters: the acoustic age; the literary age; the print age; and the electronic age. McLuhan assumed the electronic age would be home to what he termed the “global village.” For McLuhan, the latter would usher in a medium controlled by electronics and computers, i.e., the Internet. A year before he published his *The Medium is the Massage*, he used television to predict his global village with the Internet. Interestingly enough, his remarkable ability to predict the future is available on the very medium he predicted, YouTube (mywebcowtube, 2016).

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is well known that the length of man’s existence is dwarfed by the age of the earth itself. An analogous comparison can be made about man’s technological advances in relationship to his existence. McLuhan saw a change in the latter comparison when he put pen to paper. As we end the first quarter of the first century of the third millennium, we see McLuhan’s prognostications come to pass and take hold. With the advent of AI, media, mediums, messages, and massages will all develop in new ways that boggle the mind.

As they develop and rapidly change, so too will our understandings and interpretations of the world around us. We must be ready to not only accept rapid change for the good but understand that it might upset the apple cart as well. McLuhan, Fiore and Agel had it exactly right when they placed in bold capital letters on the back cover of their book: “ALL MEDIA WORK US OVER COMPLETELY.”

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Fuller, B., Agel, J., & Fiore, Q. (1970). *I seem to be a verb environment and man’s future*. Bantam Books.
- mywebcowtube. (2016, June 7). *Marshall McLuhan 1966 — Predicting the Internet with Robert Fulford* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/ijeMM-NXvus?si=tMUEZvOe4pyRZAfv>
- Kahn, H., & Agel, J. (1973). *The megaton ideas of the one-man think tank: Herman Kahn-sciousness*. Signet.
- Kuhn, T. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1964). *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*. Beacon Press.

- McLuhan, M., (1962). *The Gutenberg galaxy: The making of typographic man*. Toronto University Press.
- McLuhan, M., & Fiore, Q. (1967). *The medium is the message*. Bantam Books.
- Orwell, G. (1949). *Nineteen eighty-four: A novel*. Secke & Warburg.
- Popper, K. (1959). *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Hutchinson & Co.
- Sagan, C., & Agel, J. (1973). *The cosmic connection: An extraterrestrial perspective*. Anchor Books. Garden City.
- Van Dyke, V. (1960). *Political science: A philosophical analysis*. Stanford University Press.

Author Biography

Dr. Harvey Wolf Kushner is Chairman and Professor at the Department of Criminal Justice at Long Island University. He is Chairman of the Presidium of the European Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Kushner is an American scholar of global terrorism. He has served as an expert witness in a number of high-profile U.S. court cases involving international terrorism, such as "*United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*" (al Qaeda operatives indicted on charges arising out of the near-simultaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1998) and "*Duffy v. Port Authority of New York & New Jersey* and *Pesce v. Port Authority of New York & New Jersey*" (successful multimillion-dollar civil litigation arising out of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing) to name a few. He has authored numerous writings and five books on terrorism including the multi-award winning *Encyclopedia of Terrorism* (SAGE Publishing). He serves on a variety of editorial boards such as the *American Behavioral Scientist* and the *Journal of Applied Security Research*.

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) which allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.