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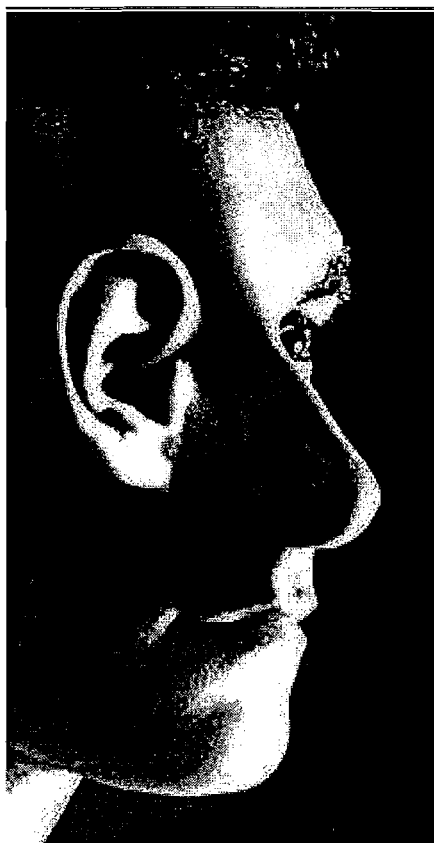
IDEAS

Marshall McLuhan Is Back From the Dustbin of History

By ALEXANDER STILLE

Until relatively recently, the media guru Marshall McLuhan, with his gnomic pronouncements about "acoustic space" and "cool" media and "square" people, appeared to be a dated artifact of 1960's culture destined to go the way of tie-dyed shirts, Peter Max posters and Timothy Leary. "Once exalted as oracular, Marshall McLuhan's theories now seem laughably inadequate as an intellectual guide to our times," one critic wrote in 1987, seven years after his death.

But in the last several years McLuhan has emerged from the dustbin of history to become a pop icon of the Internet age. Wired magazine lists him as its patron saint, a flurry of books with titles like "Digital McLuhan" present him in a new light, and a generation grappling with the transforming effects of cyberspace, cell phones and virtual reality has begun to see him not as out of date but ahead of his time.



McLuhan foresaw a culture traversed by an omnipresent, roving ear and eye. From "The Medium Is the Message" by Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore (Random House)

"Everyone thought that McLuhan was talking about TV, but what he was really talking about was the Internet — two decades before it

appeared," Kevin Kelly, the executive editor of *Wired*, is quoted as saying on the jacket of "Digital McLuhan," a recent book by Paul Levinson, a professor of communications at Fordham University.

"When I first came on the scene, in 1990, no one talked about McLuhan — it was as if he had never existed, and when I spoke about him there was no traction," Camille Paglia, professor of English at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, said in an interview. "Now his name is mentioned everywhere. Now that all these young people are spending time on the Internet, there is a real ferment of interest in him."

But McLuhan's legacy is complex and controversial, just as it was in his own lifetime. Many of his supporters readily admit that much of his scholarship has not aged well, even though they say the ideas underlying his work have acquired new relevance. "For a discipline like media studies, he makes for a weak founding father because he was wrong so much of the time," said Mitchell Stephens, a professor of journalism at New York University and the author of a McLuhan-inspired book called "The Rise of the Word and the Fall of the Image," which came out last year. "He said a lot of wild and silly things, and a quite high proportion of truly brilliant things."

McLuhan's meteoric rise rests principally on two early works, "The Gutenberg Galaxy," which appeared in 1962, and "Understanding Media," which came out two years later. In the first book, McLuhan examined writing as a technology and mapped the ways in which literacy and printed books had changed not just the external world but also people's behavior and modes of thought. Written as television was emerging as the principal source of information, McLuhan insisted that it had become possible to define and describe print culture because it was coming to an end and was destined to be replaced by the electronic age. "Understanding Media" took things further. The book, which introduced the phrase "The medium is the message," described how technology — from the wheel and the alphabet to the telegraph, airplane, typewriter and television — changed social relations and mental attitudes.

He also predicted the coming of "the global village" and insisted that electronic technology would decentralize power and information, allowing people to live in smaller clusters far from major urban centers while having the same access to information. "My main theme is the extension of the nervous system in the electric age, and thus, the complete break with 5,000 years of mechanical technology," he wrote in 1964.

His idea that new media would break the tyranny of print culture — with its emphasis on rational, linear thinking and restore a richer, sensory balance — appealed to the Woodstock generation and was welcomed by counterculture figures like John Lennon and Abbie Hoffman. McLuhan rapidly became an international celebrity: he was the subject of cartoons in *The New Yorker* and a long interview in *Playboy* magazine, and his name was often bandied about on the hit television show "Laugh-In." In 1965 Tom Wolfe wrote a famous profile of McLuhan called "What if He Is Right?" in which he raised the possibility that McLuhan might be "the most important thinker

since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein and Pavlov."

"He was like this intellectual rocket in the sky," said Mr. Wolfe, who now shies away from making such a grand claim for McLuhan. "It's not hard to see why he attracted so much attention. The ideas were new and television was young when he started. People hadn't really thought about what difference it would make." Others insisted he was a fraud and coined the term "McLuhacy" to describe his enigmatic pronouncements.

McLuhan's fans and detractors were often reacting to the same thing: his penchant for bold, striking statements delivered in short bursts of aphoristic prose with only suggestive hints of historical evidence to support them. "I don't explain, I explore," he often said. For example, in "Understanding Media," he wrote: "Since TV, the assembly line has disappeared from industry. Staff and line structures have dissolved in management. Gone are the stag line, the party line, the receiving line and the pencil line from the backs of nylons."

When McLuhan wrote, assembly lines had hardly disappeared and the link between industrial production and television appeared tenuous. But he was prescient in seeing that highly flexible electronic technology would change both factories and management hierarchies. The part about "stag line" and the nylon stockings appears to be more of a Dada-esque joke — something he enjoyed — than a serious statement.

"I would say McLuhan was a great thinker, but I wouldn't say he was a great scholar, because I don't think he really had the patience to work out some of the implications of what he was saying," said Neil Postman, head of the media studies program at New York University, whose books like "Technopoly" and "Amusing Ourselves to Death," acknowledge a heavy debt to McLuhan. "McLuhan's questions were generally more interesting than his answers."

Others are more critical. "McLuhan did armchair philosophy, not empirical science," said Gweneth Jackaway, a media professor at Fordham.

McLuhan reveled in his sudden fame, and it affected both the nature of his work and its reception.

After the publication of "Understanding Media," McLuhan gave up any attempt to develop his ideas systematically and preferred appearing on talk shows to writing books. He seemed almost to relish becoming a parody of himself. In 1967 he published a Pop Art book of aphorisms called "The Medium Is the Massage" and invented other half-serious variations of his famous dictum, like "The medium is the mess-age" and "The tedium is the mass-age."

McLuhan was both a household name and a popular synonym for obscure nonsense, appearing as himself in a cameo in Woody Allen's "Annie Hall" in 1977. But the psychedelic swirl of text and images in "The Medium Is the Massage," created with the designer Quentin Fiore, was an inspiration for recent magazines like *Wired* and *Details*.

Most attribute his revival to the way that McLuhan's work offers a means of understanding the implications of digitization. Writing when the personal computer was nearly 20 years in the future, McLuhan showed an uncanny understanding of what would become the information age. "Electric light is pure information," he wrote. "The General Electric Company makes a considerable portion of its profits from electric light bulbs and lighting systems. It has not yet discovered that, quite as much as AT&T, it is in the business of moving information." Written more than 30 years before e-commerce, this was hardly a common insight in 1964.

McLuhan's defenders say his work was ahead of its time in other ways. The idea of the global village appears to be more apt metaphor for the age of the Internet and satellite television than for an era when the electronic media consisted mainly of one-way radio and television broadcasting. "The evolution of media has sharply increased the match of his metaphors to the reality of our communication," Mr. Levinson writes in "Digital McLuhan."

McLuhan hypothesized that borderless electronic media would undermine the nation-state, a notion that seemed unlikely at the height of the cold war but that seems more relevant in an age in which people use fax machines, VCR's, satellite dishes, cell phones and computers to receive information their governments don't want them to have. "When McLuhan spoke about the renewal of tribalism, it seemed to be about the hippie movement of the 1960's, which was just a passing fad, but today you can see a different kind of tribalism on the Internet, where people are affiliating online in various interest or discussion groups," said Lance Strate, chairman of Fordham's communications and media department. He and about 150 professors of communications recently formed an association of McLuhan-influenced scholars.

But precisely as McLuhan and his ideas are regaining favor, the reaction against them are also growing. The Fordham communications and media department had a major battle over the appointment of Mr. Levinson as a tenured professor, as a result of which some people in the department no longer speak to one another.

"What I find particularly disturbing is the idea of technological determinism, the notion that machines run the show," said Ms. Jackaway, a member of the defeated anti-McLuhan group. "I am a firm believer that human beings invent machines, that from the beginning there is intention, that the way we use them is mostly the result of human and political decisions. But I guess you could say McLuhan has influenced my work: I have been spending the last 15 years trying to prove him wrong."

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