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ABSTRACT

Speech as a mode of communication and speech education as a means of training for proficiency in the use of this mode are assuming increased importance in light of McLuhan's assertion that electronic media is replacing print as the main source of information and entertainment. Emphasis upon the uniqueness and independence of the oral mode, a direct consequence of McLuhanism, encourages the development of bodies of theory and systems of criticism specifically addressed to it. The re-evaluation of traditional criteria and standards, based upon literary standards, becomes necessary. Rhetoricians are called upon to develop non-linear patterns of speech organization and to evaluate the predominately linear systems of proof based on enthymeme and example. Also, speech educators who are concerned with devising curricula, organizing courses, and selecting instructional materials must take into account the new world awareness of their students produced by the electronic "global village." (LG)

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marshall mcluhan: his significance for the field of speech communication

by Douglas Ehninger

I

Since Marshall McLuhan sometimes is referred to as "the philosopher of 'Laugh In,'" it is perhaps more than a coincidence that Henry Gibson, the poet laureate of that mosaic kaleidoscope of sight, sound, and color, should have authored as one of his more popular verses the one-line poem, "Marshall McLuhan, what are you doin'?"

What is Marshall McLuhan "doin'," and what significance does "what he is doin'" have for speech and for speech education? The pages that follow are addressed to these two large and open-ended questions. At the outset, however, let me make clear my own position concerning this so-called "Dr. Spock of pop culture," this "guru of the boob tube." And this perhaps I can best do by falling back upon a version of Pascal's famous "gamble."

This "gamble" in its original form, as you will recall, concerned the existence of God, and went essentially as follows: "If," said Pascal, "I believe in God and am wrong, I have nothing to lose. If, however, I do not believe in Him and I am wrong, I have a very great deal to lose. Therefore, I choose to believe."

Now, so far as McLuhan is concerned, I find myself in a similar position. If he is right, or even partly right, in some of his basic premises he is contributing in a significant way to an understanding of our rapidly changing society. On the other hand, even if he is wrong we have little or nothing to lose by pausing for a time to listen to him, for perhaps no other thinker has developed an explanation of our contemporary world which touches on so many aspects of thought and culture, or which speaks more directly to the role of speech and of speech education within that culture.

Whatever else one may or may not know about McLuhan, he no doubt is acquainted with the aphorism "the medium is the message" or, as McLuhan puts it in the title of one of his more recent books, "the medium is the massage." Since this summarizing statement stands at the heart of McLuhan's system, with implications and inferences reaching out from it in all directions, let us begin here and in our discussion proceed, as it were, from the core to the periphery. And let us first be sure that we understand what McLuhan means by a "medium."

Although it may at first hearing seem strange, a "medium," says McLuhan, is an "extension of man"—any device or technology, whatever it may be, from an axe, a lever, or a microscope, to an automobile, computer, or highway, and including, of course, radio, television, and the newspaper—anything that in some way extends the reach or increases the efficiency of man's physical or nervous system.

Thus viewed, the wheel, for example, is an extension of the leg or the foot, the book is an extension of the eye, clothing is an extension of the skin; and because these things are "extensions" they are "media." In this sense also an electric light bulb is a perfect or universal medium—something which, simply by its presence, extends indifferently any visual sensation that comes within its range.

But at the same time that it is an extension of man, a medium, says McLuhan, also is an amputation of one of man's bodily parts or sense organs. Because the wheel does the work of the legs but is independent of them, when a man drives an automobile he is in a figurative sense an amputee, just as surely as he would be if he lost both of

his legs in an accident and then looked for a way to move around. Similarly, by wearing clothes a man, we may say, amputates his skin—transfers to a manufactured product, a technology, many of the functions his skin would perform were he naked.

Now, continues McLuhan, because a medium, though separate from a bodily sense or part is in reality an extension of that organ, when any one medium or any particular combination of media gains ascendancy over the others—when one or several senses or parts are extended out of all proportion to the rest—a distinctive balance or ratio among all members is created. And more specifically, when the senses are involved—when the eye is extended at expense of the ear, or the ear at expense of the eye—this altered balance will have profound consequences on the way in which we perceive and report the world. For this reason, any new medium or extension of man, provided it is sufficiently pronounced, will affect the way individuals habitually think and act, and this, in turn, will determine the sort of society or culture in which their lives are lived. The important thing about any medium, therefore, is not its contents—not the messages that may be carried over it or the uses to which it may be put—but the presence of the medium itself.

Consider, for example, the changes that such a medium as television has made in our lives; how as a result of its introduction the character of the movies has changed, how minor league baseball has suffered an eclipse, how the reading habits of thousands of persons have altered, how it has caused us to rearrange our living rooms or dens so as to put the television set in a preferred position. And think, above all, how as a result of watching television day after day something is slowly happening to our whole perceptive machinery—how the ear, instead of being by-passed as a sense organ, as is the case when one reads silently from a book, now has a position of importance at least equal to that of the eye. And realize again that this sensory rebalancing is happening irrespective of the content of the medium—irrespective of whether as television viewers we habitually watch variety shows, situation comedies, sports events, or old movies. In short, because the sheer fact that we watch is in so many ways more important than what we watch, the medium is indeed

the message; for, in the end, it is the watching rather than the content that is working the greatest change upon us—is influencing us most strongly—by setting up a new ratio among our sense organs and thus altering the way we perceive and order the world.

With this hypothesis concerning the alteration of sense ratios as the touchstone of his philosophy, McLuhan looks back cosmically over the sweep of human history and, unsurprisingly enough, finds four major turning points in the course of affairs: the development of the phonetic alphabet, the invention of moveable type, and the discovery of the telegraph as the first of the electronic devices for sending messages over long distances and to mass populations at high rates of speed.

Prior to the development of the phonetic alphabet, so his theory goes, socially and politically man lived in a tribal or communal state—in a face-to-face situation of continuous intellectual and emotional contact where everyone knew the business of all and experience was universal and simultaneous. Psychologically, he existed in an environment “where all the senses were balanced . . . a closed world of tribal depth and resonance, an oral culture structured by a dominant auditory sense of life. . . .” So far as perception and behavior were concerned, “detachment” as the separation of thought and action did not exist. Men did not “react” without “acting”; response in an intellectual sense was not separated from response socially or behaviorally. Most important of all, because in this exclusively oral or spoken culture the auditory sense of life was dominant, man’s orientation was to a world of “acoustic” rather than of visual space—a world which because it was acoustic had no defined center or margin, in which direction was at best a hazy concept, and in which stimuli, instead of coming from isolated and definable points of the compass, surround man and envelop him.

With the introduction of the phonetic alphabet and the deliberate separation of the given facts of the physical world from an arbitrarily devised set of graphic symbols designed to stand by deputy for these facts, all this changed. For the phonetic alphabet, as McLuhan sees it, was not merely a new and more efficient set of marks useful for recording thoughts or sending messages, but like all communication media was a distinct

technology; and as a technology it also was an amputation that reoriented the sense in a pervasive fashion. What it did, specifically, was to extend the eye and to give it an importance all out of line with that of the other senses as ways of knowing or perceiving reality.

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan describes at length the impact which the alphabet exerted. There had, he says, been many kinds of writing, pictographic and syllabic, prior to its discovery, but only the phonetic alphabet, by making a sharp division in experience in a way that no previous system had done, gave its user, as it were, an eye for an ear, thus freeing him from the tribal trance of resonating word magic and the accompanying web of kinship. In order to appreciate the power of the alphabet in this respect we may, says McLuhan, compare Chinese culture, where over thousands of years the ideogram as a form of writing has left traditional mores and practices undisturbed, with the situation in the emerging nations of Africa where in a single generation alphabetic literacy has released the individual, initially at least, from the tribal web and given him a predominantly Western frame of values.

The separation of sight, sound, and meaning made possible by the phonetic alphabet, says McLuhan, affected the individual and his society in significant ways. Besides making possible the repression of feeling and emotion when engaged in action, it enabled man to disassociate himself from others; to go his own way and pursue his own interests, independent of what those around him might be saying or doing. In short, the alphabet as a convenient and highly functional way of recording knowledge and sending messages gave rise to individuality; and in the process made possible the isolated scholar pouring over his manuscript or the scientist toiling alone in his laboratory. At the same time, by extending the eye over vast distances in the form of official decrees and dispatches, it made possible the far-reaching political organization and military structure necessary to support the first world empires of enduring permanence.

But above all else, so far as McLuhan is concerned, alphabetic writing affected profoundly the way man perceived and described his world. For not only did it make

him predominantly eye- rather than ear-minded, but it also oriented him lineally.

As a technology, alphabetic expression has built into it an important limitation, and this is that only one idea can be communicated at a time. Whereas in face-to-face oral address, for example, words, facial expressions, bodily movements, dress, and the like, function simultaneously — send concurrent and sometimes contradictory messages — when we describe the speaker's behavior in writing we are obliged to deal with each of these elements — and with each finer aspect or sub-division of each element — sequentially, thus transforming into a linear or strung-out and time-extended form what in fact is a configurational and instantaneous happening.

Habitual exposure to such linear codifications of experience eventually causes us, says McLuhan, to conceive of reality itself as linear — to impress our predominant way of saying upon our predominant way of perceiving — until we not only think in linear terms but conceive of the elements of our environment as linear.

Whether we choose to accept all of the casual relations which McLuhan asserts to exist between "Gutenberg" or print culture and religious and industrial reorganization, scientific advance, and literary and artistic developments is immaterial for our present purpose. What is important is that in the gospel according to McLuhan for some five hundred years man lived and thought in a predominantly eye-minded, lineally organized, fragmented, printing-press world, and this not only had profound effects upon him as an individual but also in a major way shaped the society and culture of which he was a part.

Today, however — and here we come to what is perhaps central tenet of McLuhanism; that aspect of McLuhan's thinking and writing which not only has attracted most attention, but which has given rise to the most bitter disputes between his disciples and his critics — today, says this thinker, we are in the midst of the most profound personal and social metamorphosis of all, for we are living at a time when the long reign of print at last has come to an end and is being replaced by new and radically different means of communication.

As man increasingly turns from print to the newer electronic media as sources of information and entertainment a most important thing is happening to him. Although he is, for the most part, unaware of the changes going on within and about him, the fact is that he is again being tribalized — is again becoming a member of a society marked by the sort of common awareness and depth involvement that marked the culture of his pre-literate ancestors.

Why is all of this happening? Primarily, says McLuhan, for three reasons. First, the electronic media bring us information instantaneously and on a world-wide basis. Second, they present this information to us in configurational rather than in linear form. And third, they are by nature "cool" rather than "hot."

That the electronic media bring us information instantaneously and without the delays attendant upon even the most rapid production of print messages is self-evident. Today, no matter where one lives, he may as he sits before the television screen observe the inauguration of a president, the launching of a space ship, or a campus demonstration at the very moment that these events are occurring.

But besides bringing us information on a world-wide scale and with almost magical rapidity, in the case of television in particular this information is presented to us in a simultaneous or configurational rather than in a linear pattern, and in this respect simulates the experience of participating in a street riot at first hand, as distinguished from reading about it later in print. Moreover, because light comes through the television screen instead of being reflected upon it as the photograph or moving picture is reflected, McLuhan regards television as a tactile as well as an auditory and visual medium; says that the television message is, in effect, tattooed directly upon the skin of the viewer. Thus, unlike print which addresses the eye only and in so doing extends this one sense in high definition, television, he holds, is multi-sensory and enveloping in its appeal — is a medium in which sight, touch, and sound cooperate to receive the signal. And because television does bombard us with a combination or cluster of stimuli in this all-at-once fashion, it not only heightens our sensory awareness but by bringing back into play receptors atrophied through

long disuse introduces a balance or orchestration among sense stimuli such as has not existed since the advent of print.

The importance of this new orchestration — this new ratio or balance of sense experience — cannot, in McLuhan's view, be over-emphasized, for, as you will remember my saying earlier, he believes that the receptors to which messages are habitually directed — the sense or senses to which day after day they are addressed — will be those through which man comes to perceive his world, and will as a consequence, determine how he organizes or structures his society. In line with this assumption, a culture itself McLuhan thinks of or defines simply as a certain ordering of sense perceptions.

And, third, as I have said, in his media-oriented account of social change, McLuhan sets off the electronic media from print on the ground that they are, as he says, for the most part "cool," while print is "hot."

In Chapter 2 of *Understanding Media* he explains these terms:

There is [he says] a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends a single sense in "high definition." High definition is a state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, "high definition." A cartoon is "low definition," simply because very little visual information is provided. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation or completion by the audience. Naturally, therefore, a hot medium like radio has very different effects on the user from a cool medium like the telephone.

Now, of all the electronic media the coolest is television. Because of the scanning principle on which the television picture is based — because it consists simply of a mass of lines or dots of light — it leaves much to be filled in or completed by the viewer. It is, in fact, the viewer who by this process of

filling in actually creates the picture, just as it is the viewer who by filling in and organizing the individual dots in a painting by the French pointillist Seurat, himself creates the scene the artist wishes to convey.

Because the viewer is constantly filling in "vague and blurry images"—is, in effect, carrying on "a creative dialog with the liconoscope"—watching television, unlike reading the hot print on a page, calls for a high degree of "personal involvement and participation." Put summarily, television is a highly involving medium, and, as such, one with respect to which "detachment," or the conscious separation of thought and feeling, of action and reaction, is difficult or impossible. To watch television is automatically to participate; to become involved. Hence the fascination which television holds for us and the influence it exacts over us.

But while the electronic media are, for the reasons just described, working major changes upon man and his environment—while we are, as it were, living in the midst of a swift and agonizing transition between two major periods of technological history—as is always the case under such circumstances, we are, says McLuhan, largely unaware of what is happening to us. Adopting what he describes as the "numb stance of the technological idiot," we labor under the delusion that it is the content of the media—the exploitation of sex and pornography in the movies, of violence and crime on television, and the like—that is chiefly responsible for the problems which we see about us—for such things as the generation gap, the hippie movement, revolt on the campus, and the breakdown of race relations. What we must realize is that it is not so much the messages as the media themselves that are responsible for these things; that we are floundering in a no-man's land between the age of print and the age of electricity; are at a major turning point in the course of affairs, the nature of which we do not understand and the importance of which we do not appreciate.

There is, of course, a great deal more that one might say about McLuhan and McLuhanism; and in particular about the inferences which he draws from some of the assumptions I have here outlined—inferences which extend from descriptions of dark glasses and mesh stockings as cool to an explanation of football's growing popularity

and baseball's apparent decline on the ground that the first, like television is configurational, while the second, like print, is linear. It also would be interesting and instructive, if space allowed, to survey the sizable body of critical literature which has grown up about his work—the caustic attacks and impassioned defenses contained in such collections of essays as *McLuhan Hot and Cool* and *McLuhan Pro and Con*. This literature, however, one can, if he is interested, explore for himself. In the closing paragraphs of this discussion let us turn to the second of the major heads I mentioned at the outset and examine some of the implications which McLuhan's major thesis appear to have for the field of speech and for those of us who as teachers or researchers are particularly concerned with the problems of speech education.

First in this connection, we may say that if McLuhan is correct—if the age of print indeed has passed and a new age dominated by the presence of the electronic media is upon us—speech as a mode of communication and speech education as a means of training for proficiency in the use of that mode are assuming an importance which they have not enjoyed since Gutenberg. For, unlike the printing press which is a consumer and distributor of written discourse, radio, television, and the telephone as the principal electronic media for disseminating information are consumers and distributors of oral discourse. Clearly, if these media are to be used to their maximum efficiency message senders not only need to know how to speak effectively, but they also need to understand a good deal about the nature, limits, and uses of the oral mode.

Even more importantly, the shift from print to electronics, from eye- to ear-mindedness, emphasizes the independence and uniqueness of the oral mode, thus encouraging the development of bodies of theory and systems of criticism specifically addressed to it. Too often in the past, in the minds of many persons speech theory, as that branch or species of rhetoric designed to govern oral productions, has only been a pale reflection of the theory of written discourses, so that we have found ourselves confronted by the absurdity of "oral English" or, to paraphrase a famous remark of James Winans', the notion that a speech is simply "an essay standing on its hind legs." But while speech

theory has suffered from this misunderstanding and confusion, in the area of speech criticism the effect has been even more unfortunate. For not only has speech criticism struggled for years to free itself from the grip of literary criticism—to develop as a unique and viable discipline in its own right—but from time immemorial speeches as discourses designed to be communicated orally, and therefore produced according to principles and rules of effective oral rhetoric, have suffered at the hands of critics who have attempted to evaluate them by applying literary standards.

Under such circumstances is it surprising that speeches should suffer by comparison—that as a genre the speech should be judged less profound in content, less hospitable to the creative imagination, less finished in style? Put bluntly, discourses in the oral mode, and consequently courses in speech designed to help students explore the oral mode and to perform in it credibly, have suffered from the fact that for hundreds of years we have lived in a print culture—a culture in which those individuals and academic departments that preside over discourse in its written form not only have enjoyed unusual public prestige, but have, to a very great extent, been able to impose their own standards of excellence on other modes of communication.

If, as I say, McLuhan is correct—if eye culture is indeed losing dominance—we may, I believe, confidently look forward to a gradual change in this respect—may anticipate a future in which instruction in oral communication will gain in public acceptance and prestige, and in which speeches as the products of oral discourse increasing will come to be judged in their own right rather than by literary standards.

Beyond this, I think we may say that as we pass from the age of print the underlying grammar and rhetoric of such media as television and film also will come to be recognized as unique; that is, we will come more clearly and on a more widespread basis to see that these modes too are independent art forms or communication vehicles, each governed by its own grammar and rhetoric, and each to be judged on its own terms according to those standards and criteria, as well as by those critical methods which are indigenous to it. If McLuhan and McLuhanism, by emphasizing the distinctiveness of

the various communication modes, can contribute even in a small way to this result we should be grateful. At least, in my own case I know that I look forward to the day when I shall no longer hear someone say, “The movie did not do justice to the book” or “The television production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was interesting but it just wasn't Shakespeare's play.”

A second and more specific, but none the less important, implication of McLuhanism for the field of speech concerns the structure of public oral discourse and the modifications which may have to be made in our conceptions of that structure as we move into the electronic age.

Traditionally, of course, influenced by print culture or not, we have taught and used a linear pattern of speech development, whether the particular pattern in question be the classical parts of exordium through peroration, the Ramistic analysis and synthesis, the geometric or demonstrative development of the Port Royalists, or the reflective thinking process of John Dewey. All of these patterns, in one way or another, have assumed that if a discourse is to be organized properly some sort of ground work must be laid, a forward-moving thought line developed step by step in accordance with the logical demands of the subject or the psychological demands of the listeners, and, finally, a summarizing or applicative conclusion added.

But if McLuhan is right, and if the configurational all-at-once mode of presentation characteristic of television gradually is changing our perceptual habits—or if, as he repeatedly suggests, it is the mosaic arrangement of the front page of our newspaper, with its stories developed according to the rule that makes the lead paragraph an all-at-once nutshell or capsule summary of what is to follow—if these and the similar configurational stimuli of contemporary art and literature are indeed affecting us as he suggests—then may not we as rhetoricians be called upon to follow suit by developing non-linear patterns of speech organization, as well as to evaluate anew our predominantly linear systems of proof as couched in the enthymeme and example? At least, this seems to me to be something worth thinking about, especially in the face of some of the evidence which the communi-

cation researchers now are gathering concerning the relative effectiveness of climactic and anticlimactic order.

So far as our specific interests as speech educators are concerned—so far as we are concerned with devising curricula, organizing courses, and employing instructional materials—McLuhan's ideas, if they are valid, also have relevance for us. And in no respect is this more true than in the very difficult problem which we now face of understanding our students.

As McLuhan reminds us, when the average child enters school today, he already has been exposed to between ten to fifteen thousand hours of television viewing. During the course of this exposure he not only has been relentlessly bombarded by all of the "adult" news of the modern world—stories about racial discrimination, rioting, crime, inflation, and the sexual revolution—but he has had written on his skin the bloody message of Vietnam, has witnessed the assassinations and funerals of the nation's leaders, and has been orbited with the astronauts through space. Moreover, because television is a multisensory medium and a "cool" one, he has had a particular balance or ratio of sense experience implanted upon him and has learned to respond not in a reserved and detached way but in a way that entails total emotional and imaginative involvement.

Is it, therefore, surprising that when the child enters school he often finds it difficult to adjust to the fragmented visual methods of a print or book culture? After five or six years of conditioning in which all of his senses have constantly been bombarded by the electronic media he naturally "craves in-depth involvement, not linear detachment and uniform sequential patterns." "But suddenly," and here again I quote McLuhan's own words, "[suddenly] he is snatched from the cool, inclusive womb of television and exposed—within a vast bureaucratic structure of courses and credits—to the hot medium of print. [Under such circumstances] his natural instinct, conditioned by the electric media, is [of course] to bring all his senses to bear on the book he's instructed to read. . . . [But] print resolutely rejects that approach, demanding an isolated visual attitude of learning rather than the *Gestalt* approach of the unified sensorium."

And what do we call film strips, and video tapes, and educational television programs as used in the schools? For some strange reason, we call them audio-visual *aids*, thus unconsciously revealing our biased assumption that it is still the book—the linear, fragmented, hot printed page—that is the central engine and principal focus of the educational enterprise. And we do this at a time when, in reality, the situation has been exactly reversed—when it is the electronic and visual media that have for most persons become the principal agents of education, when educative experiences more often take place outside of the classroom rather than within it, and when the book is, therefore, itself becoming the supportive instrument or *aid*.

As the television child grows up and proceeds to high school and college the problem becomes even more acute, for he increasingly finds himself in conflict not only with the older book culture but with individuals—teachers, professors, writers, critics, and the like—who have a vested interest in protecting and preserving that culture; and who, therefore, often are openly critical of the content and method of what have been his principal educative instruments to date. No wonder we have a generation gap; no wonder we have unrest on the campus; no wonder we have dropouts and alienation. All of these phenomena, suggests McLuhan, are to be explained as aspects of the friction that is bound to arise when two different cultures collide—when the products of the cool, involving, multisensory medium of television confront the older and entrenched products of print culture.

Educators everywhere and at all levels, says McLuhan, must face these facts—must realize that today most persons' education takes place chiefly outside of the classroom, that thanks to modern information technology, the entire environment has become one huge "classroom without walls." But for those of us in speech the call for this new orientation has a special pertinence, not only because the cool, involving medium of oral discourse—the medium that students know most commonly outside of class—is the special province of our own study and practice, but also because through the subjects upon which our students choose to speak in performance courses and the topics we develop in courses in rhetoric and communi-

cation theory we have a special opportunity to make our work socially relevant — to explore the means by which a rapprochement between the old and the new, between the oral and the visual, may perhaps be achieved. If McLuhan and McLuhanism do nothing more than awaken the speech profession to

these possibilities, we should, I think, at least approach him with an open ear; be willing to overlook the errors of fact and the elasticity of inference which McLuhan's books contain, and to accept the general thrusts of his doctrine as timely and as provocative for our future.

PROFILE OF DOUGLAS W. EHNINGER



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Professor Ehninger's monographs have appeared in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Speech Monographs*, *The Southern Speech Journal*, *The Speech Teacher*, *Western Speech*, and *The Gavel*. He published *Principles of Speech Communication* with Alan Monroe and his reviews have included *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* and *The Southern Speech Journal*.

Dr. Ehninger was previously the Associate Editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, the Editor of *The Southern Speech Journal*, Editor of *Speech Monographs*, and Consulting Editor in Speech for Scott Foresman and Co. Professor Ehninger also served on the Editorial Board of *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, was President of the Speech Association of America in 1968, and received the Distinguished Alumnus Award from The Ohio State University in the same year.