

Marshall Arts: Retrieving McLuhan's Media Studies

Abstract: There has been a resurgence of interest in Marshall McLuhan in the last decade, and 2011 saw numerous tributes and retrospectives honoring the centenary of his birth. This article considers McLuhan's standing among contemporary scholars by analyzing three of the most common criticisms of his work: technological determinism, technological utopianism, and nonscientific methodology. The author concludes that many commentators have neglected to note that McLuhan deliberately adopted an artistic rather than scientific approach in his probes of media effects, and that his work remains relevant to scholars and students of mass communication.

Introduction

Communication theorist and literary scholar Herbert Marshall McLuhan pioneered the field now known as media studies (Macey, 2000). His explorations and observations of media's transformative effects on society garnered him considerable celebrity, especially following the publication of his 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McLuhan, 1964). McLuhan became a public intellectual being interviewed and discussed in print and on television, and entertained visits from celebrities and luminaries including Yoko Ono and John Lennon. (Sanderson & Macdonald, 1989). Filmmaker Woody Allen asked McLuhan to cameo as himself in the acclaimed motion picture *Annie Hall* (ibid). In a magazine profile journalist Tom Wolfe suggested McLuhan was “the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and Pavlov” (cited in Gordon, 1997, p.4).

Despite the widespread attention McLuhan received from the mass media and general public throughout the 60s and 70s, his views were marginal and largely forgotten when he died in 1980 (Horrocks, 2000), and the research center named for him at the University of Toronto was closed the following year. His last book, the posthumously published *Laws of Media*, was an attempt to derive a practical theory of media effects from his earlier writings (McLuhan, 2008). It seemed that the final chapter in McLuhan's legacy had been written; yet there has been a resurgence of interest in McLuhan's ideas in recent years.

Leverette (2005) offers a summary of recent developments indicating a McLuhan “renaissance”: re-releases of McLuhan's books (including a 2003 “critical edition” of *Understanding Media*); new documentaries about his work such as *McLuhan's Wake*;

“McLuhanesque” studies using McLuhan as a departure point for studying new media environments; and several recent metatheoretical texts placing McLuhan’s ideas in new context (p.4). The 1990s saw the release of several critical reexaminations of McLuhan’s work (Viswanath & Poindexter, 1996; Grosswiler, 1998). In 2011 the centenary of McLuhan’s birth was marked by a conference at the University of Toronto, a symposium at Fordham University, and many other events, retrospectives and new publications.

This resurgence has elicited varying responses. Scholar D.A. Fishman (2006) calls the McLuhan revival “one of the striking features of mass communication theory in the millennial decade” (p.567). Horrocks (2000) prefaced his booklet on McLuhan and virtuality by stating “McLuhan’s revival has its problems” (p.6). Citing the advent of the Internet as the driving factor behind the revival, Levinson (1999) asserted that McLuhan’s work was increasing in relevance, “almost as if our information age was crystallizing along the patterns of [McLuhan’s] vision” (p.XIII).

Yet what does the increased interest in McLuhan mean for communication scholars today? What relevance do his ideas have for researchers and students of media? How have his ideas held up through decades of change in the mass media? The present article will assess the relevance of McLuhan’s media studies to current communication researchers by addressing some of the most common criticisms of McLuhan’s approach to studying mass media. The article advances the position that although his scholarship is unconventional and remains controversial in academia, many of McLuhan’s ideas retain relevancy for media theorists and researchers; and the perspectives offered in his writings should be considered by students of media effects. Warrants for these claims will be developed through discussions of three criticisms of McLuhan’s work: charges of

technological determinism, charges of technological utopianism, and charges of absence of scientific and scholarly discipline. The subsequent section will establish context for and provide examples of these criticisms.

“You mean my whole fallacy is wrong”: Common criticisms of McLuhan

Marshall McLuhan appeared as himself in a scene from the 1977 film *Annie Hall* (Joffe, 1977). Set in a New York City cinema, the scene depicts the film protagonist’s annoyance at overhearing the loud pontifications of a Columbia University professor waiting in line behind him. When the professor begins discussing McLuhan’s notion of “hot” and “cold” media, the protagonist asserts that the professor is ignorant of McLuhan’s ideas and has no grounds to discuss them. To prove his point the protagonist retrieves McLuhan in person, summoning him from a position of waiting just beyond the edge of the frame. McLuhan tells the Columbia professor: “You know nothing of my work. You mean my whole fallacy is wrong!” The title of this section alludes to that exchange from the film and McLuhan’s striking choice of dialogue (written by McLuhan and not Allen according to Sanderson et al, 1989). This scene presents a whimsical depiction of the misinterpretations of McLuhan’s work commonly found in the scholarly literature, an ongoing discourse that is analyzed in this section.

McLuhan’s retrieval from the “dustbin of history” was the focus of an article in the October 14, 2000 *New York Times* (Stille, 2000). The article quotes several academics voicing contemporary perspectives on McLuhan’s ideas, and the opinions are predominantly critical. Neil Postman, whose own work in media studies was influenced by McLuhan, was quoted as saying he considers McLuhan a great thinker, but that the

questions he posed were often better than the answers he offered. Another scholar said, “What I find particularly disturbing is the idea of technological determinism, the notion that machines run the show” (p.4). One critic stated, “For a discipline like media studies, he makes for a weak founding father because he was wrong so much of the time” (p.1). These quotes are indicative of several common criticisms directed at McLuhan by supporters and detractors alike. The present section presents an overview of three criticisms of McLuhan’s work: technological determinism, technological utopianism, and a lack of scientific and scholarly rigor.

Technological Determinism

Charges of technological determinism are among the most frequently articulated criticisms from detractors of McLuhan. There is no single unanimously-accepted definition of technological determinism, but for the purposes of the present article it is best understood as the view that a society’s technology directs the development of that society, and that social change subsequent to the introduction of a new technology comes about due to inherent effects of the technology. Leverette (2003) defines technological determinism as “a powerful view of the nature of social change, wherein new technologies are discovered serendipitously and then go about altering social change and progress. Progress, in this view, is the history of these inventions, thus history itself, foreseen and unseen, direct and indirect, is nothing more than the effects of these technologies” (p.5). This perspective of societal development is criticized for emphasizing the effects of artifacts at the expense of factors such as political influences,

power relations, and personal agency (Horrocks, 2000). Technological determinism as a social theory has been called reductionist, ahistorical, and simplistic (Paragas, 2010).

McLuhan is closely associated with technological determinism due to his view of human history as a series of epochs demarcated by technological developments. The ideas presented in *Understanding Media* (1964) unambiguously identify communication technologies as a major driving force in social change. McLuhan writes that the message of a medium “is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (p.8). McLuhan offers a timeline of human history based on modes of communication, beginning with “tribal man” grounded in spoken communication (p.77); then the literate “civilized man” created by the phonetic alphabet and written communication (“Civilization is built on literacy because literacy is a uniform processing of a culture by a visual sense extended in space and time by the alphabet,” p.86); then “typographic man” following the invention of the Gutenberg printing press (“Socially, the typographic extension of man brought in nationalism, industrialism, mass markets, and universal literacy and education,” p.172); and finally “discarnate man,” product of the electric age and denizen of the global village (“Electric speeds create centers everywhere. Margins cease to exist on this planet,” p.91). In *The Medium is the Massage* (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967/2001) McLuhan posits his view of media’s sweeping transformative power unequivocally: “All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered” (p.26).

Several writers have cited Canadian communication scholar Harold Innis as a major influence on McLuhan's deterministic theories. Rogers (2000) traces a genealogy of thought starting with Innis' work analyzing the roles of orality, stone tablets, papyrus, and other communication mediums. Innis proposed that the "changing technology of communication acted to reduce the cost and increase the speed and distance of communication, and thus to extend the geographical size of empires" (p.126). In Rogers' view, McLuhan applied Innis' paradigm of technological determinism not to social and political organization, but to effects on sensory and thought processes. Rogers distinguishes McLuhan's focus of deterministic media effects from other views as the perspective that technology affects "individuals' sense ratios and patterns of perceptions" (p.125). Rogers' thesis, however, is that McLuhan's work features significant correspondences with that of E.T. Hall, and other writers have overstated the influence of Innis' determinism on McLuhan's views.

McLuhan's technology-centric view of human progress has received a multitude of criticisms. Horrocks (2000) states that McLuhan's "deterministic and monolithic account of media necessarily forgoes a detailed analysis of political dynamics that shape and exploit media in different ways" (p.9). McLuhan rival N. Frye called the determinism espoused by McLuhan a "plausible but oversimplified form of rhetoric," and disagreed with McLuhan's diagnosis of "the Gutenberg syndrome as a cause of the alienation of progress, and not simply as one of its effects" (cited in Gordon, 2010, p.5). Macey (2000) refers to McLuhan's determinism as "extreme" and adds that "the most striking feature of his studies of the media is their total failure to discuss the ownership and control of means of communication" (p.246).

Conversely, Gordon (2010) dismisses the label of technological determinism applied to McLuhan, and argues that McLuhan's ideas are actually more akin to technological optimism (an idea that will be explored further in the next section). Grosswiler (1998) likewise suggests that scholars should reappraise the labeling of McLuhan as a technological determinist. Grosswiler's book *Method is the Message* is a vigorous effort to reconsider McLuhan's work through a Marxist lens (drawing parallels between the writings of McLuhan and Marx, as well as Frankfurt School theorists Adorno, Benjamin and Marcuse) and to "reclaim" McLuhan for critical theory. Grosswiler presents a nuanced reading of McLuhan and argues that McLuhan practiced a unique version of dialectics comparable with the Marxist form. Grosswiler also notes correspondences between Marx's historical materialism and the views commonly critiqued as deterministic in McLuhan's work.

There exists a precedent for comparisons of Marx and McLuhan. Marx's ideas have been called deterministic due to his view that the means of production (the physical instruments of labor, i.e. tools and machines) cause revolutionary changes in society (Childs, 1973). In the *Communist Manifesto* (1888/2002) Marx and Engels discuss the end of feudal society as being brought about by innovation in the means of production ("For many a decade past the history of industry and commerce is but the history of the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production, against the property relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeoisie and its rule," p.225). Similarly, McLuhan saw the emergence of feudal society in Europe as a result of the invention of the stirrup (a media in McLuhan's analysis), which "made it possible to

mount a heavily armoured [sic] man on a horse and thus brought about the rise of a military-feudal aristocracy” (Macey, 2000, p.246).

In the paper “Specters of Innis and McLuhan: Marx, the Mode of Communication, and Cultural Studies,” author Leverette (2005) argues that modes of communication are an important aspect of Marxist historical materialism. This view is similar to Grosswiler’s contention that McLuhan’s work on media can be understood as an effort to establish communication technologies as a primary causal factor in history, an element missing in Marxian analysis with its emphasis on modes of production. McLuhan makes this claim in *Understanding Media*, stating that Marx and his followers “reckoned without understanding the dynamics of the new media of communication,” and that Marx’s analysis was “untimely” based on the machine, “just as the telegraph and other implosive forms began to reverse the mechanical dynamic” (p.38).

Fekte (cited in Grosswiler, 1998) asserts that McLuhan’s analysis of media totally ignores the “political, economic and military dimensions of power, as well as ownership and class interests of the mass media” (p.37), and also draws parallels between McLuhan’s timeline of advances in communication technology and Marxist historical periods: “The first era is primitive, an audible tribal culture with the oral technology of speech. The second is pre-capitalist, a visual culture with writing and the phonetic alphabet. The third is capitalist, which is an extreme visual culture with the mechanical technology of print. And fourth is monopoly capitalism, an audio-tactile culture with the electronic technology of television” (p.37). Grosswiler also cites the harsh criticisms of Williams, who totally dismisses McLuhan on grounds of technological determinism. Similarly to Fekete, Williams rejects any technological determinism due to the belief that

it “reduces everything in history outside of media to an effect and naturalizes capitalist media institutions” (p.133). Grosswiler, however, concludes that the charges of technological determinism do not stand up to scrutiny.

Leverette also contends that charges of technological determinism in McLuhan’s work do not stand, essentially because an entire system is required in order for a medium to take effect, a fact that undermines the self-sufficiency of technology implicit in criticisms of extreme determinism. Leverette argues that, contrary to the analysis of many critics, medium theory does not evince technological determinism. “While media forms and structures are internalized and function as unacknowledged catalysts for change within the structure and conduct of thought and discourse, it is the interaction between media technology and human beings that is the subject of the medium theorist, and not the technology itself” (2005, p. 10).

Grosswiler emphasizes the Marxist notion of “praxis,” or the process of putting theory into practice, and contends that critics who dismiss McLuhan as a technological determinist neglect to notice the aim of his analysis in finding opportunities for human intervention in the effects of media. For Grosswiler, McLuhan is “mining the interstices of the media hybridization for openings that allow awareness and change,” (p.74). Grosswiler defines McLuhan’s work as a “mission to understand media and the conflicts they cause in order to increase human autonomy from technology” (p.85). Critics who reject McLuhan solely on grounds of determinism fail to comprehend that the goal of his writings is to stimulate critical thinking about media to empower people with the awareness and the ability to respond.

This view is shared by Kakita (2010) who employs a rhetorical/argumentative

reading of McLuhan to assert that human agency is central to McLuhan's understanding of media effects. Kakita contends that although McLuhan's writings are "often interpreted as the technological determination (as in many arguments on media ecology), what McLuhan actually emphasizes is the productive side of this inscription," (p.236). Kakita argues that new technology and media do not deprive individuals of power, but rather "media become instruments of the rhetorical agent who argues in either a technological/media environment or a public sphere that posits the agent's power," (p.235). In a possible break from McLuhan's historical view of media, Kakita posits that although the introduction of a new technology, such as the Gutenberg printing press, produces a new medium, "the mere introduction of a new medium does not necessarily cause a shift in the cultural matrix" (p.237). Much like Grosswiler's assertion that McLuhan probed for "interstices" allowing for awareness and change, Kakita suggests that although "a particular medium reproduces a cultural matrix, its reproduction always contains a temporal and spatial gap between one medium and another – and it is precisely this gap that allows for a space of human agency" (p.236).

Support for this reading of McLuhan can be found in his own statements and writings. Despite the abundant interpretations of McLuhan as abandoning humanity's collective fate to the machinations of technology, McLuhan wrote "there is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening" (McLuhan & Fiore, p.25). Rather than voice resignation in the face of media's transformative power, McLuhan sounded a warning against somnambulistic inattention to media effects. "By continuing to embrace technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servomechanisms" (McLuhan, 1964, p.46). In other writings McLuhan refined the goal

of his studies to enabling human agency: “All my recommendations, therefore, can be reduced to this one: study the modes of media, in order to hoick [sic] all assumptions out of the subliminal, nonverbal realm for scrutiny and for prediction and control of human purposes” (Sanderson et al., p.4).

Perhaps the most significant oversight made by critics of technological determinism in McLuhan’s writings is McLuhan’s persistent thesis that “[a]ll media are extensions of some human faculty – psychic or physical” (Sanderson et al., p.89). It is important to remember that in McLuhan’s view, each technological innovation does not inhibit human faculty, but extends it. Again, in *Understanding Media*: “It is a persistent theme of this book that all technologies are extensions of our physical and nervous systems to increase power and speed” (p.90). In essence, McLuhan denies any distinction between mankind and its technology. Grosswiler (1998) quotes Marxist critic Fekete’s disparagement of McLuhan on precisely this point by saying that McLuhan “suppresses the consciousness of alienation by insisting that technology is really ourselves and by denying that the objectified praxis has really been alienated from us” (p.38). Fekete argues that McLuhan’s position cannot be considered “mechanical materialism” because McLuhan abolishes the dualism between subject and object, identifying mankind and media as one. While not supporting or agreeing with McLuhan’s blurring of the boundary between mankind and machinery, Fekete’s reading provides appropriate emphasis to a central area in McLuhan’s thought that is often overlooked by other critics and commentators. With this in mind, the charge of technological determinism in McLuhan’s writings becomes overly simplistic itself. McLuhan views the relationship between humanity and technology as symbiotic, not oppositional. Regardless of whether someone

accepts this thesis, it is central to McLuhan's writings about media and any critique of his work must take that aspect into account.

In personal correspondence with Levinson (1999), McLuhan said the label of "media determinist" (applied by Levinson to McLuhan and Innis) misrepresented his views, and elsewhere asserted his approach to media as humanistic: "In the sense that these media are extensions of ourselves – of mankind – then my interest in them is utterly humanistic" (cited in Gordon, 2010, p.24). Considering all the aforementioned perspectives on McLuhan's technological determinism, the present author concludes that McLuhan's views of historical progress are often oversimplified, and his analysis of media deserves criticism for neglecting the important aspects of media ownership and political influences. However, McLuhan defined the purpose of his media studies as encouraging critical consideration of media effects to combat the deterministic effects of communication technology. Therefore, it is injudicious to completely reject McLuhan solely based on claims of extreme technological determinism, and also incorrect to assert that his views of media ascribed omnipotence to technology with no regard for human agency. Critics who accuse McLuhan of relegating humans to the status of automatons at the mercy of media neglect to notice the insinuations in his writings that he encourages contemplation of media effects precisely to avoid this scenario.

Technological Utopianism

Gordon (2010) cites a work by Kroker on prominent Canadian communication theorists titled *Technology and the Canadian Mind*. The book discusses the theories of George Grant, Harold Innis, and McLuhan. Kroker gives the label of technological

determinism to the ideas of Grant, technological realism to those of Innis, and calls McLuhan's ideas technological optimism (cited in Gordon, 2010, p.24). The following section addresses criticisms of McLuhan based on his optimistic or "utopian" forecast of the effects of technology and media.

McLuhan's writings received ample attention in France, to the extent that they inspired a new word being coined and added to the French language: "McLuhanisme," translated variously as "the commitment to serious examination of culture" (Grosswiler, 1998, p.30) and "a synonym for the world of pop culture" (McLuhan, 1995, p.223). The influence of McLuhan on French intellectuals is evident in the writings of two prominent French philosophers: Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard.

Debord was a member of the Situationist International, a politicized avant-garde artistic organization active throughout the 1960s (Buchanan, 2010). His best-known work is *Society of the Spectacle* (1967/1970), a critique of late capitalist society and what Debord sees as mass alienation induced by the commodification of experience. Debord argued that the image is the ultimate form of the commodity and that what matters most in modern society is not ownership but appearances.

Debord describes the spectacle as "the existing order's uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue" and calls the mass media the "most glaring superficial manifestation" (24) [The book is divided into short, numbered paragraphs and does not have numbered pages, so references cite the paragraph and not page number.]. The society of the spectacle is defined at one point as one in which "the commodity contemplates itself in a world it has created" (53). Debord did not explicitly reference

McLuhan until the publication of the sequel to this work, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1990).

Baudrillard encountered Debord during the May '68 street protests in Paris and was influenced by his notion of the spectacle (Horrocks & Jevtic, 1996). Initially adopting a traditional Marxist critique of consumer society, Baudrillard eventually broke with Marxism's focus on the mode of production, arguing instead that the basis of the social order was consumption, not production (p.9). One of Baudrillard's best-known works in the English-speaking world is *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981/1994). This work presents Baudrillard's notion of the simulacra, the copy without an original, "the map that precedes the territory" (p.1). Baudrillard argued that reality has vanished, all anchors of meaning are gone, and in place of reality there is now a hyperreality of images, simulations, and mass mediation.

McLuhan's influence on Baudrillard was such that Baudrillard has been called "the French McLuhan" (Horrocks & Jevtic, 1996, p.121). Kellner (1989) wrote that Baudrillard "out-McLuhans McLuhan in interpreting television and all other media simply as technological forms, as machines produce primarily technological effects in which content and messages or social uses are deemed irrelevant and unimportant" (p.70). Baudrillard mentions McLuhan several times in *Simulacra and Simulation*. After alluding to Debord's work by saying that we "are no longer in the society of the spectacle," he asserts that "the medium itself is no longer identifiable as such," and that "the confusion of the medium and the message (McLuhan) is the first great formula of this new era" (p.30). Later in the book he refers to the "fundamental rule of McLuhan's, which must not be forgotten" (p.50). Baudrillard also referred to 'the medium is the

message' as "the very formula of alienation in a technical society" (Kellner, 1989, p.66). Another key theme in Baudrillard's writing is the idea of implosion (implosion of meaning, implosion of the social, etc.), and he states that "implosion should be analyzed according to McLuhan's formula, the medium is the message, the consequences of which have yet to be exhausted" (p.81). Baudrillard extrapolates McLuhan's formula to signify the end of both message and medium, for there are no media in the sense of "a mediating power between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another" (p.82).

Rather than label him a technological determinist, Baudrillard referred to McLuhan as a technological optimist: "There is the technological optimism of Marshall McLuhan: for him the electronic media inaugurate a generalized planetary communication and should conduct us, by the mental effect alone of new technologies, beyond the atomizing rationality of the Gutenberg galaxy to the global village, to the new electronic tribalism – an achieved transparency of information and communication" (Poster, 2001, p.210). Furthermore, he establishes his support for McLuhan's perspective by stating "even if I did not share the technological optimism of McLuhan, I always recognized and considered as a gain the true revolution which he brought about in media analysis" (p.211). Kellner (1989) concludes that Baudrillard considered McLuhan "the great media theorist of our epoch" and suggested that media theorists and researchers "should go even further than McLuhan in denying that the media are producers of meaning and that the media content or apparatus is important" (p.72).

This same technological optimism endorsed by Baudrillard was assailed by Debord in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1990). In reflecting on his seminal work on the spectacle, Debord called McLuhan "the spectacle's first apologist,"

and “the most convinced imbecile of the century” (p.14). He also attacks McLuhan’s concept of the global village while sarcastically referring to him as “the sage of Toronto”: “Villages, unlike towns, have always been ruled by conformism, isolation, petty surveillance, boredom and repetitive malicious gossip about the same families. Which is a precise enough description of the global spectacle’s present vulgarity” (p.15). Clearly Debord shares none of McLuhan’s optimism about technology’s transformative power to connect the planetary population, but rather sees only potential for further alienation and social control. Similarly, Williams criticized McLuhan for his “simplistic optimism” (cited in Grosswiler, 1998, p.139).

Mander (1978) asserts that McLuhan was not helpful to early efforts to understand television, but adds that because McLuhan “is not a person who presents his arguments in political terms,” he can perhaps be forgiven for not imparting “the most urgent meaning of the medium” (p.30). Mander’s criticism of McLuhan is also rooted in McLuhan’s optimistic approach to technology. Mander completely opposes the medium of television for several reasons, one being the unification of human experience that television enables. Mander cites watershed events in television history such as the Kennedy-Nixon presidential debates and the funeral of John F. Kennedy as early examples of television’s ability to unify millions of individuals in a communal experience. “Human ingenuity had now advanced to the point where technology could produce a nationwide, one-mind experience, previously though to reside only in the realm of the mystic” (p.29). Mander contends that McLuhan could and should have sounded a warning about the dangers inherent in such unification of experience, but “because of his celebration of our electronic connection, our planetary-tribal village, he effectively

encouraged support for the techno-mystical-unification theme” (p.29-30). In Mander’s view, McLuhan failed to adequately address the detrimental societal effects posed by the medium of television due to his near mystical vision of the global village. Although, McLuhan would have agreed with Mander’s contention that technology cannot be understood as “neither good nor bad” until it is used in a positive or negative way; McLuhan called this ambivalent attitude toward technology “the voice of the current somnambulism” (1964, p.11).

McLuhan maintained that he approached media studies from a neutral position. He described his role as an observer, just checking out the media scene to see “what’s going on” (Gordon, 1997). However, there are several instances in McLuhan’s work where he makes clear that he does not envision the global village as a harmonious utopia. When asked if all the residents of the global village will like each other, McLuhan responded: “Not likely, since proximity means there’s more abrasiveness. Close quarters strain human tolerance” (Sanderson et al., 1989, p.24). Gordon (2010) provides a quotation that further elaborates McLuhan’s ambivalent attitude toward the global village: “It never occurred to me that uniformity and tranquility were the properties of the global village...The tribal-global village is far more divisive full of fighting – than any nationalism ever was. Village is fission, not fusion, in depth...The village is not the place to find ideal peace and harmony. Exact opposite. Nationalism came out of print and provided an extraordinary relief from global village conditions. I don’t *approve* of the global village. I say we live in it” (p.25). Many times in *Understanding Media* McLuhan makes clear that his view of technology’s effects are not utopian: “Our electric extensions of ourselves simply by-pass space and time, and create problems of human involvement

and organization for which there is no precedent. We may yet yearn for the simple days of the automobile and the superhighway” (p.105). Elsewhere in the same book he writes: “[T]he fate of implosion and interdependence is more terrible for Western man than the fate of explosion and independence for tribal man” (p.51). However, there is an unequivocal, if measured, optimism throughout McLuhan’s writing on the transformative potential of technology. “Having extended or translated our central nervous system into the electromagnetic technology, it is but a further stage to transfer our consciousness to the computer world as well. Then, at least, we shall be able to program consciousness in such wise that it cannot be numbed nor distracted by the Narcissus illusions of the entertainment world” (p.60). In this passage McLuhan is uncritically forecasting the ability to transfer human consciousness into a machine and even conveys enthusiasm for the concept. He does not address any potential misapplications or dehumanizing effects of such a process. On the subsequent page he writes: “[M]ight not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?” (p.61). This statement exemplifies the “techno-mystical-unification” cited by Mander, and is indicative of a persistent theme and tone in *Understanding Media*. McLuhan said the book was written with “a faith that concerns the ultimate harmony of all being” (p.5). Several scholars have cited the influence of McLuhan’s Catholic beliefs on his writings (Marchand, 1989), and while McLuhan did not explicitly refer to Catholicism in his work it is possible his faith factored into his optimistic views of technology’s unifying potential. It is the position of the present author that McLuhan, while not deserving of the “utopian” label, was overly optimistic in some of his forecasts of technology’s transformative effect on society.

However, this optimism was almost always tempered by an acknowledgement that technological progress alone cannot cure all of society's ills, and that even when innovation presents solutions for a problem it always introduces new challenges.

Lack of Scientific/Scholarly Rigor

Another charge commonly levied against McLuhan is that his work lacks the testability of scientific inquiry and the sober approach of academic scholarship. While ultimately advocating his continued relevance to scholars, Fishman (2006) concedes that McLuhan's "aphoristic way of speaking, his elliptical style of writing, and his heavy reliance on 'probes' hurts the ability to understand his ideas" (p.567). Fishman also offers four key weaknesses of McLuhan's media studies: his work overlooks the effects of media on social organizations; his dichotomy of media into "hot" and "cool" mediums fails to provide a sound basis for making meaningful distinctions; his theories of media legitimized the status quo in broadcasting and advertising; and in general the claims he made far exceeded the evidence he provided (p.573). *Wired* magazine said of McLuhan "his pronouncements on current events always add an element of loony dispassion and professional absent-mindedness" (cited in Gordon, 1997, p.37). In an early review of *Understanding Media*, Ramond (1966) expressed exasperation that McLuhan "has not helped us, as scientists might, by telling how he made his observations of a similar sort. That is his privilege, to be sure, but he leaves us only the not-necessarily-repeatable observations of the artist, not the ought-to-be-repeatable observations of the scientist" (p.68).

One of the common criticisms of McLuhan from academics was that his writings never offered a testable, repeatable, or practical theory for studying media. Gordon (1997) reconciles these complaints by asserting that McLuhan was aware of his lack of a theory and never intended to propose one. “McLuhan’s purpose is not to offer a theory of communication but to probe the effects of any and every artifact that mediates (all media are intermediaries) between the human body and its physical environment” (p.16-17). The persistent criticisms that McLuhan’s thought lacked a scientific basis spurred McLuhan to develop a standardized framework for analyzing media (Gordon, 1997). The end result was the tetrad of media effects, developed in collaboration with his son Eric and published in *Laws of Media: The New Science* (1988) eight years after McLuhan’s death.

In describing his father’s theory of media, Eric McLuhan (2008) likewise ascribes an unconventional approach to theorizing in the elder McLuhan’s work. “When McLuhan insisted that he did not use theories, he meant that he did not use them in the way that people expect theories to be used. ‘I don’t have a Theory of Communication’ means ‘I don’t work in the way of Normal Science. I don’t start with a theory to prove or disprove or submit to the torturers. I start with—and stick with—observation.’” (p.27). McLuhan refers to his father’s methodology as a “technique of discovery” utilizing Symbolist art techniques of juxtaposition in his writings to make “surprising” connections between concepts. “He applied artistic methods directly to the materials and circumstances of everyday life. He discovered that the formal sensibilities of the artist could be applied outside the realm of art as the surest way to explore environments and their effects” (p.36). Echoing this reading of McLuhan’s approach as artistic in nature, Eric McLuhan

quotes Stearn's analysis of *Understanding Media* as a toolkit for examination of the media and practical use; not a completed work of discovery, but a jumping-off-point for such an operation. Regarding McLuhan's style of approach Stearn writes: "Exaggeration, in the sense of hyperbole, is a major artistic device in all modes of art. No painter, no musician ever did anything without extreme exaggeration of a form or a mode, until he had exaggerated those qualities that interested him" (cited in McLuhan, 2008, p.37).

Corresponding to the opinions cited above, McLuhan's work exploring media effects and especially the predictive or "prophetic" content of his writings, can be seen as fulfilling McLuhan's own definition of an artist as stated in *Understanding Media*: "The artist is the man in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time," (p.65) and "The artist picks up the message of cultural and technological challenge decades before its transforming impact occurs" (p.65). Clearly McLuhan is regarded as someone who grasped the impacts of media decades before the effects were apparent in the popular consciousness, particularly in regard to the development of the Internet as a global communications medium.

Fishman (2006) noted that, in an era of major technological transformation, someone who wrote about communication technology affecting society decades ago is bound to be seen as prophetic. One of the primary driving factors behind the current resurgence in McLuhan scholarship is the prescience of his media speculations. In 1964 he was writing that "we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned," (p.3) and many critics have noted that his concept of the global village is far more comprehensible and immediately evident in the Internet age than it was when *Understanding Media* was first published (Levinson,

1999). *Wired* magazine named McLuhan the “patron saint” of the publication (cited in Gordon, 1997), and he has been called the prophet of the Internet (Levinson, 1999). Such pronouncements would likely not be possible had McLuhan constrained his writings on media to what he could prove or demonstrate. Rather than adhere to the standards of rigorous scholarship, McLuhan elected to conduct his initial explorations into media effects with the mindset of the artist rather than the scientist. In *Understanding Media* McLuhan indicates why he believes such an approach would be beneficial: “No society has ever known enough about its actions to have developed immunity to its new extensions or technologies. Today we have begun to sense that art may be able to provide such immunity” (p.64). Taking this view under consideration, it seems that McLuhan’s artistic approach to his explorations of media effects is attuned to his stated goal of increasing human autonomy. It is helpful to remember that before he turned his attention to media analysis McLuhan practiced literary criticism. McLuhan’s books feature abundant references to literary works and authors, especially McLuhan favorite James Joyce. McLuhan exercised his literary ambitions in his writings, packing his books with extended metaphors, hyperbolic pronouncements, and ample amounts of puns and wordplay. The statements of his son Eric, as well as McLuhan’s frequent references to the role of artists in his books, suggest that this was a deliberate approach adopted by McLuhan to fulfill the artist’s role of providing immunity from the effects of technology.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to assess the relevance of Marshall McLuhan’s analysis of media to contemporary communication scholars and researchers, in light of some of the most common criticisms of his work. McLuhan’s work has been influential,

with scholars such as Gordon and Levinson adopting and applying his theoretical framework in their own studies of media (Gordon, 2010; Levinson, 1999); but it is clear that many scholars believe McLuhan's work has aged poorly, despite the Internet arguably making his notion of the Global Village a reality in the last decade (Stille, 2000).

Fishman (2006) has said that McLuhan brought more attention to the field of communication as a discipline than any other individual, and that his body of work is still worth examining. Fishman sees McLuhan's legacy as being that of a provocative thinker and public intellectual who was "willing to engage in a wide-ranging dialogue about the role of media in society" (p.574). Fishman concludes that McLuhan's "work is of a mixed quality, but the controversies that McLuhan inspired have lived on longer than his detractors ever imagined" (p.574).

Upon considering the disparaging assessments of McLuhan's scholarship outlined in this article, the author determines that McLuhan's media studies remain relevant to students of communication technology despite the criticisms of his work and decades of social and technological change that might've rendered it obsolete. Many critics have rejected McLuhan's views entirely because of perceived technological determinism in his writings. The section of this article discussing those criticisms argued that such critics neglect important aspects of McLuhan's studies; namely, his stated mission to increase human autonomy from technology, and his thesis that all media are extensions of human faculties. While not advocating determinism, the present article identified nuances in McLuhan's thought that indicate some critics have been too hasty in rejecting him as a technological determinist. The article also addressed claims that McLuhan was a

technological utopian, and decided this charge was inconsistent with views expressed in McLuhan's writings, although McLuhan did have a tendency to be uncritical and extremely enthusiastic in his predictions of the societal effects of technological progress. Lastly, the article considered the criticism that McLuhan's work lacks scientific and scholarly rigor. It is the view of the author that these criticisms have merit, and much of McLuhan's scholarship in the area of media studies is unconventional; however, the author determines that this was a tactical decision made by McLuhan in support of his goal to increase awareness of the effects of media and technology. McLuhan's views on media remain relevant today, perhaps more so than ever as Levinson (1999) has suggested.

While the academic assessment of McLuhan's work is not unanimous, the continuing relevance and merit of his media studies has been affirmed by the diverse community of scholars working in the tradition of his approach. Research in the area of Medium Theory and organizations such as the Media Ecology Association demonstrate how scholars have extended McLuhan's ideas to study the rapidly evolving media landscape. The centenary of his birth in 2011 heralded a worldwide appreciation of his work and legacy. All of this indicates that McLuhan's work is far from obsolescence and ripe for continued retrieval.

References

- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. (S.F. Glaser, Trans). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. (Original work published 1981).
- Buchanan, I. (2010). *A dictionary of critical theory*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Childs, D. (1973). *Marx and the Marxists*. New York, NY: Barnes & Noble Books.
- Debord, G. (1970). *Society of the spectacle*. (F. Perlman & J. Supak, Trans.). Detroit, MI: Black & Red. (Original work published 1967).
- Debord, G. (1990). *Comments on the society of the spectacle*. (M. Imrie, Trans.) PDF version retrieved from <zinelibrary.info/files/Comments%20-%20READ.pdf>.
- Fishman, D.A. (2006). Rethinking Marshall McLuhan: Reflections on a media theorist. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 50(3), 567-574.
- Gordon, W.T. (1997). *McLuhan for beginners*. New York, NY: Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc.
- Gordon, W.T. (2010). *McLuhan: A guide for the perplexed*. New York, NY: Continuum Books.
- Grosswiler, P. (1998). *The method is the message: Rethinking McLuhan through critical theory*. Montreal, Quebec: Black Rose Books.
- Horrocks, C. & Jevtic, Z. (1996). *Introducing Baudrillard*. Lanham, MD: Totem Books.
- Horrocks, C. (2000). *Marshall McLuhan and virtuality*. Duxford, Cambridge: Icon Books.
- Joffe, C.H. & Rollins, J. (Producers) & Allen, W. (1977). *Annie Hall* [Motion Picture]. United States: United Artists.
- Kakita, H. (2010). The body, materiality, argumentation: Re-reading Marshall McLuhan's Understanding Media. *Conference proceedings -- National Communication Association/American Forensic Association (Alta Conference on Argumentation)*, 2010, 233-240.
- Kellner, D. (1989). *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to postmodernism and beyond*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Leverette, M. (2003). Towards an ecology of understanding: Semiotics, medium theory, and the uses of meaning. *Conference papers – International Communication*

- Association*, 2003 annual meeting, 1-28.
- Leverette, M. (2005). Spectres of Innis and McLuhan: Marx, the mode of communication, and cultural studies. *Conference papers – International Communication Association*, 2005 annual meeting, 1-34.
- Levinson, P. (1999). *Digital McLuhan: A guide to the information millennium*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Macey, D. (2000). *The Penguin dictionary of critical theory*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Mander, J. (1978). *Four arguments for the elimination of television*. New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc.
- Marchand, P. (1989). *Marshall McLuhan: The medium and the messenger*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F. (2002). *The communist manifesto*. New York, NY: Penguin Group. (Original English translation published 1888).
- McLuhan, E. (2008). Marshall McLuhan's theory of communication: The yegg. *Global Media Journal – Canadian edition*, 1(1), 25-43.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- McLuhan, M. & Fiore, Q. (2001). *The medium is the message: An inventory of effects*. Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press. (Original work published 1967).
- McLuhan, E. & Zingrone, F. (Eds.) (1995). *Essential McLuhan*. New York, NY: Basic Books. Electronic version retrieved from
<http://books.google.com/books?id=UUMoGmujREwC&pg=PA233&lpg=PA233&dq=mcluhanisme&source=bl&ots=2DZVQF0a-X&sig=gGtbK59W_oZQ2HIHspbqQOJY8z4&hl=en&ei=0LqxTYT3HMMyhtweUb3uCw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=8&ved=0CEgQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q=mcluhanisme&f=false>.
- Miolo, G. (2004) Why McLuhan's still hot and cool. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 61(2), 214-218.
- Paragas, F. (2010). Organizing and reframing technological determinism using Burrell and Morgan's four paradigms for the analysis of social theory. *Conference papers – International Communication Association*, 2010, 1-25.
- Poster, M. (Ed.) (2001). *Jean Baudrillard: Selected writings*. Stanford, CA: Stanford

- University Press.
- Ramond, C.K. (1966). McLuhan is the message. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 6(2), 68.
- Rogers, E. (2000). The extensions of men: The correspondence of Marshall McLuhan and Edward T. Hall. *Mass Communication and Society*, 3(1), 117-135.
- Rosen, J. (1990). The messages of “the medium is the message”. ETC: A Review of General Semantics, 47(1), 45-51.
- Sanderson, G. & Macdonald, F. (Eds.) (1989). *Marshall McLuhan: The man and his message*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum.
- Stille, A. (2000, October 14). Marshall McLuhan is back from the dustbin of history; With the Internet, his ideas again seem ahead of their time. *New York Times*. Retrieved from < <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/14/arts/marshall-mcluhan-back-dustbin-history-with-internet-his-ideas-again-seem-ahead.html> >.
- Viswanath, K. K., & Poindexter, P. M. (1996). Unthinking Modernity: Innis, McLuhan and the Frankfurt School (Book). *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 73(2), 502-504.