



Multi-Media: The Laws of the Media

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The Laws of the Media

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Curious as to what Marshall McLuhan is thinking about and working on these days, I asked him to write an article for the EJ Multi-Media Department to let English teachers know his latest thinking about media learning and its effects in our culture. Though the clamor of the media awakening of the '60s has quieted, the work steadily continues; and what follows is a look at the direction of McLuhan's contemporary work.

*Many English teachers in the United States may not be aware of his most recent book, *City As Classroom*, which he writes about in the following article. It is available only through The Book Society of Canada Limited, 4386 Sheppard Avenue East, Agincourt, Ontario M153B6 (\$4.95). Within the next year it will be available in the U. S. from the National Textbook Company, 8259 Niles Center Road, Skokie, Illinois 60077. (NT)*

My most recent publication is *The City as Classroom*,¹ designed to serve as a catalyst for dialogue in community colleges and in high schools. Ivan Illich had done a book on *De-Schooling* in which he argued that, in our contemporary world, the traditional answers for all subjects were now to be found in the urban environment outside the classroom. Since, however, the ordinary student today is in close touch with those urban information services which provide the answers for the subjects he is studying, it seemed desirable to use the classroom as a place in which to put the questions. Way back in 1946 Clarke and Sloan, two economists at Columbia University, had done a study on *Classrooms in the Factories*. To their amazement, they found that the business budget for education on company time greatly exceeded the community budget for education in the schools. If, in 1946, education on company time was greatly in excess of community education in school and college alike, today, a whole generation later, that ratio has increased many times. In fact, most people in the

commercial world (including politics) spend their time and energy investigating each others' lives. Espionage, or the gathering of data, has become the biggest business in the world, both nationally and internationally. Top spies and double agents have to be trained in the latest sociology and perform their multiple meditations on the meaning of changes in fashion and changes in sports and changes in ideas.

It seemed to the co-authors of *The City as Classroom* that this new game was one in which students were well qualified to participate. Such participation offered a means of training in observation as well as in various skills still taught in the classroom. The world of observation includes the entire area of literary and media study, since both literature and media require much training in perception and critical awareness. The world of advertising alone offers a wide range of artistic activity in the charge of the most highly trained artists and word-smiths that ever existed in the world. These highly trained and highly paid people happen to be anonymous, and are retained to study and to manipulate audiences who, in turn, are completely at liberty to study their methods of manipulation. The current advertising budget in North America is thirty-three billion dollars per annum (almost the same as the booze budget), a sum mostly devoted to creating addiction to products and services.

The multitude of these advertised products and services constitutes a vast new environmental *ground* of information best studied by recognizing the interplay between the *figures* advertised and the *ground* of the services by which they are presented. For example, most of the ads are for hardware products, presented by "software" images, which depend upon a huge *ground* of electric pictorial media. The well-known gestalt pattern of *figure* and *ground* offers a basic strategy in perception, since no situation can exist without the interplay of both factors of *figure* and *ground*. Thus, the *figure* of the printed page now exists in a *ground* of TV news and programming. The by-play between a *figure* and *ground* causes a per-

¹Co-authored by Kathryn Hutchon and Eric McLuhan.

petual shift in patterns and values. A principal advantage of the *figure-ground* approach is that it provides a means of studying change in overall situations. Using "overall" as a reminder of the place of jeans in our society, it would be the task of the student to track down, among other aspects, the nostalgic function of jeans as a means of relating to the firm and secure life of their sturdy grandfathers toiling on niggardly farms. The *figure* of nostalgic form in clothing and entertainment alike is another key to life in a rapidly changing electronic environment. There is a new need for roots and a desperate new identity crisis resulting from rapid change.

The City of Classroom enables students to leave the classroom (the base of operation) in pairs or small teams to study particular situations in the media, in news of politics, in the courts, in the prisons, or in homes since the family is also in a state of flux, undergoing heavy flack.

One procedure, by way of applying the *figure-ground* approach, is to take the instance of the motor car and to study the *ground* of services incidental to its existence as a *figure* in our world. It should be mentioned that what is referred to in the phrase, "the medium is the message" is not the car, but the complicated *ground* of services engendered by the car; for example, macadam highways and roads, traffic signals, auto insurance, and the entire world of oil and gasoline, mechanics and parts, and motor car manufacture in general. The student will quickly find that what is called "car pollution" is only one of many items in the car environment which has reshaped our world of work and leisure. The student can resort to various ways of building up an inventory of the effects of the car on daily life, one of which is simply to imagine a situation in which the motor car has suddenly ceased to exist. The student might begin by noticing the effect of this disappearance on his own life and on the lives of his parents and friends. He might note how it would alter the areas of residence and work, and the distances between these areas, if the car disappeared.

The method of observing by suddenly removing a particular technology or *figure* draws attention to its side effects which are the *ground* of that *figure*. In a word, the *ground* is mostly hidden and taken for granted in a world where many people seem to be mostly asleep. The *figure-ground* approach offers a basic way of studying our culture without getting into controversy about whether a particular thing is good or bad in itself. This study of *ground* also bypasses the problem of programs and content, whether in books or electric media. The content is not *ground* but *figure*, and the overwhelming effect of any technology reaches the public by means of the *ground*, not by the program or content. This confusion, in turn, has bred enormous uncertainty and controversy about such things as violence on

television (for the parents of our students, the concern used to be about violence in comic books). When, however, the student does an inventory of the side effects of the radio, or of writing, or satellites, subways, or zippers, he will discover that the innumerable disadvantages of these services amounts to a very formidable indictment of the particular *figure*. That is to say, all innovations are very destructive of many aspects of any society and are typically shunned by the Third World of non-literacy. One way of focusing attention on the pro and the con of any innovation or technology is to set up a mock formal trial in which the students can dramatize the defense and prosecution, via a judge and jury, of the electric light, the airplane, or whatever technology they happen to be working upon.

A basic approach, which the editors of *The City as Classroom* thought best to avoid, is one that will be introduced into later editions, namely, the relating of the studies and technologies to the functions of the two hemispheres of the brain. The left hemisphere with its bias towards lineality and classification and the sequential ordering of life and language is complemented by the right hemisphere with its simultaneous and holistic patterning of human activities. The dialogue between these hemispheres is effected by the corpus callosum, the network of nerves permitting the complete interplay of the two hemispheres.

Since our conventional curricula are almost entirely assigned to the faculties of the left hemisphere, the activities of the right hemisphere have been played down to a point designated as "the great brain robbery." The dominant technology of any culture or environment naturally enhances the activity of one or the other hemisphere and our literate western world has quite unconsciously pushed the left hemisphere to the extreme point of reversal in our electric age. The two hemispheres alternate as *figure* and *ground* (since any *figure*, when duly enlarged, tends to flip into *ground*).

The current and dominant theory of media study is the study of content and program, that is, the study of the *figure* minus its *ground*; for example, the Shannon-Weaver model of communication implies a pipeline image, a *figure* without a *ground*. This is typically a left hemisphere approach and is used in all studies, even literature. In left-hemisphere terms, literature is concerned primarily with the content of poems, novels, and plays, and the kinds of people (*ground*) brought into play by such items and for whom the novels, poems and plays were originally written are ignored. In a word, the public is the hidden *ground* of all entertainment, whether high or low. To return to basics in the study of anything whatever means returning to the *ground* of the central effects of that thing. In the case of literacy and of literature, "basics" means the study of the *effects* of literacy and literature,

which involves a right hemisphere approach to the public created by the forms of literacy and literature, which in turn draws attention to the publics created by the non-literary media of the electric age. "Basics" always means a study of effects, whereas "know-how" is left hemisphere implementation, rather than awareness of structure and effect. The current concern about basics is merely a left hemisphere concern about efficiency and know-how and about a decline in left hemisphere skills and left hemisphere quantitative measurements.

My current writing is derived from the interests already mentioned and concerns a study of the laws of the media. (Perhaps it will be named

"Phenomenology of the Media.") This approach to the media is a right hemisphere study which is analogical rather than logical, simultaneous rather than consecutive. In each technology the question is asked, "What does it enhance?" and, second, "What does it obsolesce?" and third, "What does it retrieve that had been eliminated much earlier?" and finally, "What does it flip into when pushed to its maximum potential?" It is easy to illustrate this from as immediate a matter as money which enhances speed of transaction, obsolesces barter, retrieves potlatch (conspicuous consumption), and when pushed to its limit becomes credit. **E**

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