

International Journal of McLuhan Studies



Understanding Media, Today.
McLuhan in the Era of Convergence Culture

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Re-cognizing McLuhan's critical thought

*We look at the present through a rear-view mirror.
We march backwards into the future.*

This year over 200 events worldwide have revitalized vibrant multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary debate around McLuhan's thought, best known for his popular concepts such as 'the global village' and 'the medium is the message'. Drawing on his most famous works, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964), we can readily understand why in the last sixty years his name has mainly been associated to media theory. In the last two decades, especially, the arrival of the Internet, the explosion of new interactive media, the convergence between old and new media and the development of innovative communication practices have indeed confirmed that Marshall McLuhan's ideas and the approach of the School of Toronto are still as relevant and transformative today as they were fifty years ago when he foresaw how technology would transform humanity. We cannot but acknowledge the impact of media technology on culture and welcome McLuhan's thought in every disciplinary field, since there is no subject area, as a socially intended form of knowledge, which is excluded from a technological environment. While it is clear how in the last fifty years his most acclaimed aphorism 'the medium is the message' has gained favour and recognition in relation to mass media and, more recently, to new media, we believe that this motto is most valuable as a brilliant epistemological tool, as a valuable critical and empirical method.

As John Robert Colombo describes him, he was 'the country's Aristotle, taking inventory of material causes and immaterial effects, assuring us of their interconnectedness'. His ideas and explorations are rooted in a 360° conception of media which integrates subjective and social dimensions, which transcends hyperspecialized and fragmented disciplinary research practice so that we might better understand the paradigms of our present-day knowledge society. He provided us with an incredible methodological toolkit to help understand causes, effects and connections which goes far beyond Media and Communication Studies, as traditionally conceived, and instead embraces a wide range of subjects which, in the present more than in the past, require a 'McLuhanian' approach; consider subjects such as Performing and Visual arts, Linguistics, Literature, Intellectual and Cultural History, Social Sciences, Educational Studies and Anthropology. Still, we have not been as good as he was at going beyond his 'messages' (books) and at valuing him as a 'medium' (a critical method).

It is time to recognize that his messages are metaphors of their historical period – 'All words, in every language, are metaphors', he said in one of his provocative probes – and their reception, in particular, is strictly related to the cultural and historical context where they were read ('the content is the reader'). His 'messages' were in fact mainly conveyed through the means of the 'Gutenberg Galaxy' (i. e. the accumulated body of recorded works of human art and knowledge, especially books, together with the changes occurred in social and cultural paradigms and in human consciousness following the invention of the printing press), which demonstrates even more that their meaning derives from their medium and their figure/ground relation ('All words at every level of prose and poetry and all devices of language and speech derive their meaning from figure/ground relation').

It is time to move on from his 'messages', then. The purpose of McLuhan Studies today is to understand McLuhan as a critical 'medium' and, even more than *understanding* him, *re-cognizing* his intellectual thought, 'resuming possession' of his methodology, identifying it from his work

and applying it to our present reality. This is the reason why we are starting this new experience of the *International Journal of McLuhan Studies*.

1. The International Journal of McLuhan Studies: the editorial product and the digital variant

*The age of writing has passed.
We must invent a new metaphor,
restructure our thoughts and feelings.*

In principle, there may seem to be a number of inherent contradictions in the idea of an academic journal in McLuhan's name. First of all, academic journals are usually related to either a particular academic discipline, or a specific author, or a research field. Yet, in drawing on the work of McLuhan, we cannot but implicitly call upon a wide range of disciplines, as well as make reference to an increasing number of technologies; and we cannot but allude to the life and work of the author in his own; but, at the same time, be tempted to project the atypical and unconventional figure of McLuhan in the future. Secondly, assuming that the definition of 'academic' would therefore sound restrictive for a journal in McLuhan's name, its purpose still indeed remains to serve as a meta-forum for the introduction and presentation for scrutiny of new research and the critique of existing research in the field of McLuhan Studies, i. e. an umbrella of research and knowledge areas ranging from the studies on McLuhan's thought and insights to disciplines which were re-thought in new terms after McLuhan's contribution. McLuhan Studies therefore includes areas such as Education, Social Studies, Arts and Humanities, Politics and Economics. Ideally, the Journal will espouse a variety of approaches where the study of the effect of the latest form of media on culture and society will progress beyond the traditional concept of media as technologies.

Finally, the concept of 'meta-forum': how should this be developed in the era of the Internet? The Open Journal System has launched a new generation of journals with open access, broader distribution and improved accessibility, which can develop in the direction now made possible by web 2.0. The big challenge is therefore to transform the virtual writing seminar space of traditional academic journals from an intertextual, exclusive, intermittent intellectual discourse to one which is hypertextual, interconnected and open-ended. In this sense, the Journal aims to create a critical environment which is not limited to the presentation of a number of selected 'points of views', and one which goes beyond the intertextuality and silent thinking of the Gutenberg Galaxy. We stand before an era of convergence culture where old and new media intersect, where the power of the producers and the power of the consumers interact in emergent, unpredictable ways. Thus, the idea to advocate a tool(kit) to promote knowledge by means of connective interchanges has in mind the realization of a framework consisting in a synthesis of the Gutenberg and McLuhan Galaxies, where by 'McLuhan Galaxy' we mean a network community, part of a convergent culture made of old and new media. In this respect, in order to create a cultural dispositive (in Foucauldian terms), the journal intends to overcome the

*The book is a
private confessional
form that provides
a 'point of view',
said McLuhan*

limits of the Gutenberg Galaxy in a traditional academic approach shared between a few peers and sustained overtime by a theoretical niche in a monolithic research environment.

This Journal is therefore meant to be a meta-critical rethinking of the concept itself of 'academic journal' as both 'medium' and 'message': Rethinking academic journals as 'medium' means sanctifying the 'wedding between language and electricity' in the attempt to open the 'book mentality' of traditional journals (Gutenberg Galaxy) to a continuously updated critical discourse cross-fertilized by the McLuhan Galaxy. In practical terms, this can be thought of as an extension of academic journals to a more participatory form of interaction, information sharing and user-generated content.

The idea underpinning the extension of an academic journal to a really hypertextual interconnected 2.0 dimension would then deeply affect the 'message', as it would sustain the analytical abstract thinking of the editorial product with the additive, aggregative, empathetic and participatory forms of expression of the digital variant. Furthermore, the bringing together of written communication and audiovisual systems of symbols and signs would overcome the critical divide of the mind operated in the shift from oral to written language. In this respect, we want to consider *The International Journal of McLuhan Studies* as a place where the circular influence between media and messages really comes together, a place where academic research opens its boundaries and meets the wider digital network community with the intent of becoming fertilized. We do not know what new messages the revolutionizing of the 'book mentality' of academic journals would bring in terms of knowledge, but we believe that the best way to predict it is to invent it. The outcomes of a 'wedding'

between the Gutenberg Galaxy and the McLuhan Galaxy are therefore unforeseeable, but it is an experiment worth trying.

Literacy, in translating man out of the closed world of tribal depth and resonance, gave man an eye for an ear and ushered him into a visual open world of specialized and divided consciousness

2. The editorial product

Every issue of the Journal will present a different monographic topic, addressing these principal areas of interest:

- a. *McLuhan, the message and the global village*, welcoming papers on the studies on Marshall McLuhan, on his thought and on his insights. Main topics: the very McLuhan, the Toronto School, Media Ecology, media laws, media studies, McLuhanism, etc.
- b. *Education and the new scenario*, welcoming papers on the critical approach to the traditional educative patterns and institutions, new environments and new educative figures. Main topics: school/media, digital natives, digital literacies, the Gutenberg parentheses,

edupunk, invisible learning, learning interfaces, book/ebooks/non-books, new devices to support education.

- c. *Social Media, networks and new dimension of life in digital culture*, welcoming papers on the new theoretical and scientific research studies focused on the Internet, on convergence culture and on topics like self-organization, emergence, social media, collaborative web, user generated content, tagging, mashing-up strategies, folksonomy, identity, privacy and control.
- d. *Fiction and its 'metaphors of reality'* welcoming papers on McLuhan's critical approach in the analysis of traditional and new narratives. Main topics: McLuhan's critical writings on literature, literature and cinema as expressions of mediated reality in the context of convergence culture where traditional literature and cinema are subject to multimedia hybridizations.
- e. *Art (and techne), from sensorial dimension to extended mind*, welcoming papers on electronic age new practices, mind-body analysis, performing and visual art, human and social prostheses, theoretical aspects of new bodies. Main topics: new sensorial paradigms, human computer interaction, cultural interfaces, new screens, mobile media, ubiquitous computing, data-visualization.
- f. *Economic political dimensions and globalization*, welcoming papers on the relationship between media and politics. Main topics: economy, ecology, management, wikinomics, 'long tail', local, global and glocal dimensions, new 2.0 democracies, political inclusion, gender, geopolitics and technologies for social inclusion.

A part from the theoretical frameset of the topics accepted in the journal, the real structures, selected for each monographic issue, will follow this format:

1. *Rumors (Editorials)*, an opening section for opinion pieces and leading articles offering both an overview of each issue and different viewpoints.
2. *Messages (Papers)*, the main section based on the papers accepted after a double blind peer review. In this section it will also be possible to find papers written from renowned experts and researchers, occasionally including a special section dedicated to a critical, contentious, eccentric, heretical, unwelcome, provocative contribution regarding McLuhan and his thought.
3. *From the Gutenberg Galaxy (Reviews)*, a section dedicated to reviews of books, articles and other scientific specialist writings which will move from a traditional concept of reviews as descriptive testimonies, analysis and personal opinion to a dialogical narrative form stimulated by probing questions; also, in each issue this section will address a different professional category to review one single book (such as artists, politicians, teachers), thereby avoiding the circular 'book mentality' of academic journals where reviews are usually written by academics to other academics, as if they were an abstract meta-category.
4. *On Air (Interviews)*, represents the transcription of interviews with people involved in spe-

cific studies of the monographic issue. It is connected to the digital variant of the journal in order to trigger a debate and continue the analysis of a topic by means of a participative debate online (meta-forum).

5. *Media Ecology (Focus Map on Media Ecology topics)*, is the section related to this particular field and it will host contributions and new perspectives concerning this theoretical niche.
6. *Media Archeology (Focus Map on Media Archeology topics)*, will focus on today's communication technologies by considering them in relation to their socio-technical historical antecedents. It will also engage in historical research into forgotten, obsolesced, neglected and sometimes retrieved or revived media technologies, such as LP records, telegraph equipment, mechanical and electric typewriters, audio cassettes, 8-track tapes, old personal computers, etc. All four quadrants of Marshall McLuhan's Laws of Media are relevant; considerations of what new technologies enhance, reverse, retrieve, and obsolesce.
7. *Probes (Discussions)*, is a micro-section which aims to stimulate an online debate (meta-forum) starting from some of McLuhan's probes, bringing them up to date in relation to contemporary debates.

The editorial product, distributed in electronic and paper form, presents a digital variant that emphasizes the academic nature of the journal, facilitating and re-engaging issue after issue an open-ended intellectual discourse sustained by the active peers of the research community around McLuhan Studies.

3. The digital variant

The digital variant of the journal will function as an online 'toolkit' (and a shared board) in order to engage in an open-ended debate on the topics analyzed in each monographic issue. The main idea is to replicate some of the sections of the journal and to promote others that do not exist. In fact, editing digital variants has not necessarily corresponded to a web 2.0 (or 3.0) vision, to a participative or folksonomic approach to knowledge, nor has it directly adopted the social media resources offered by present (and future) online systems. In most cases, these aspects are still related to the traditional idea of publication and their digital output is a scarcely enriched version of the editorial product. As we have anticipated above, the challenge of this journal, by means of its digital variant, is therefore to transform the virtual space of traditional academic journals from an intertextual, exclusive, intermittent intellectual discourse to one which is hypertextual, interconnected and open-ended.

The structure of the digital variant will mirror some of the journal's sections, reframing them in a participative, social-media driven platform.

1. *Journal*: main platform. The main system is a mashed-up system realized on several web 2.0 tools. It essentially has a double harvesting/dual function: on the one hand as an editorial CMS (Content Management System) to manage the different interactive sections and sub-platforms and to present and organize the output of the journal; on the other hand as an OJS (Open Journal System) to collect and manage the academic reviews (by the means of a double peer review) and diffusion of materials.

2. *Messages (Papers)*. The papers are available in digital format (abstract or full papers, depending on copyright/copyleft notices). In the digital format it will be possible for any contribution to be quoted, inserted in traditional social networks or commented on using micro-blogging features. Some of these papers will be inserted in the Hermes system: a sub-platform for hypertextual writing and critiques. Once they are inserted in this sub-platform, the papers will be enriched with multimedia elements, such as notes, comments, other sub-texts and links which are included directly in the body of the text, preserving the original contribution but extending it in a connective mode.
3. *From the Gutenberg Galaxy (Reviews)*. This section will be entirely inserted into a blog-style sub-platform, in order to elicit new contributions and new critical approaches from the reviews, from the authors of the reviews and from the authors of the materials reviewed. 'Blog-style' means that the posts will be aligned in chronological order but also be framed on a semantic tag-engine to create a cross-fertilized critique between similar topics and different posts and vice-versa.
4. *On Air (Interviews)*. This section presents the original (video) streaming of the interviews, framed in a system of topic indexing, in order to disseminate parts of the interviews on social networks and to obtain a direct bottom-up feedback from people interested in the topics. The aim is to encourage a debate and continue the topic's analysis by the means of participative online contributions (meta-forum).
5. *Media Ecology/Media Archeology*. These sections have an interactive timeline (aligned to the Google Timeline application) in order to explore the principal contribution over time of both research fields. The elements of the timeline can be expanded and enriched.
6. *On the Wall*. This section is an interactive board of contributions related to each monographic issue. It is the multimedia cover of the publication, with short talks by researchers and experts in several fields. The paper version will contain only a referral to this interactive wall. The 'Wall' will make it possible to directly record a video contribution in order to stream it from the website and to bookmark it with a QRcode.
7. *Aphorisms (Interactive Discussions)*. This section will initiate interaction on McLuhan's quotes, cited by the Hermes sub-platform for hypertextual writing and critiques. The aphorisms inserted in this sub-platform are enriched with multimedia elements, such as notes, comments, other sub-texts and links directly inserted in the body of the text, preserving the original contribution but extending it in a collective and connective manner.

*Environments are not
just containers, but are
processes that change
the content totally*

4. Understanding media today: McLuhan in the era of convergence culture.

Any new technology is an evolutionary and biological mutation opening doors of perception and new spheres of action to mankind

On the wave of McLuhan's centennial, this first issue of The International Journal of McLuhan Studies intended to merge the traditional reception of his thought with the new cross-disciplinary patterns of convergence culture. According to Henry Jenkins's idea, we are in the era where old and new media intersect, where grassroots and corporate media collide, where the power of the media producer and the power of the consumer interact in unpredictable ways: re-cognizing McLuhan's thought is the formula of this first issue of the Journal in order to understand media as a rich, multifaceted complex environment.

The first section of Issue 1, 'Messages', will open with a very stimulating two-panel painting of McLuhan's figure by Robert K. Logan and Bruce W. Powe. The first paper, *McLuhan misunderstood. Setting the record straight* by Robert K. Logan will draw on some of McLuhan's most provocative, but yet most misunderstood probes clearing up some of the misconceptions generated around his work. Remarks such as 'I don't pretend to understand my stuff. After all, my writing is very difficult', 'I don't necessarily agree with everything I say', 'You don't like those ideas? I got others', 'Do you think my fallacy is all wrong?' have offered some detractors and critics enough 'contents' to question his scholarship and suggest that his writing was largely hype and whimsy and at best merely poetry. Logan explains how these quotes comprehend a much wider critical vision and a 'positive' obsolescence in relation to the mainstream of academia which go beyond a simplistic 'outrageousness'. He then moves on to clarify the misunderstanding regarding McLuhan's 'technological determinism' and explore it in the direction of a better defined 'total-field-theory approach'. In this respect, he introduces one of McLuhan's most significant legacies as a social critic, which is the study of environments (their structure, their content and their impact on people in terms of human perception, understanding, feeling and value), in other words, 'media ecology'. Finally, in the last part of his paper, Logan offers an updated rereading of the pillars of McLuhan's thought clarifying some of his most popular one liners such as 'the medium is the message' and 'we become servomechanisms of our technology'. In *Apocalypse and Alchemy: Visions of Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye* Bruce W. Powe compares McLuhan with his more traditionally academic and theoretically opposite counterpart, Northrop Frye. This paper explores their agons, harmonies and complementarities suggesting the possibility of a theoretical synergy between them which would form the crux of what can be considered as the Canadian indigenous apocalyptic prophetic tradition. As Powe argues, McLuhan and Frye represented two specular definitions of reality, which were reflected in their styles and their identities. While in the former the satiric, playful, quarrelsome, destabilizing, futurist and alarming attitude covered his cautionary concern, in the latter the scholarly form was tempered and cautious, but his lyrical enthusiasm moved his prose into fleeting ecstatic passages. The former was centrifugalist, the latter was centripetalist. Despite their differences, Powe presents yet another perspective on McLuhan showing us the bridge connecting his thought to Frye's through association in literary training and finally meeting on Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Both of them used verbal analogies and metaphors to comprehend concerns of being and consciousness, perception and value. Still, while their critical thought made of them complementary figures, an entwined 'double-faced figure, like Janus', as John Robert Colombo defined it, nevertheless they confirmed a different perspective on society which was clearly marked in Frye's editorial on 'Communications' in July

1970. At the heart of the debate, which seems to be still relevant in the intellectual *querelle* today, were the values of print versus screen and radio, the function of the writer as a counter-culture medium (here defined instead in McLuhanian terms as p. o. v, 'point of view') and the totalitarian role of mass media. As Powe highlights, although this was probably the most agonistic moment of their relationship, it is still in their intellectual synergies that we can better understand convergence and friction between media systems, between the literary world and other expressions of mediated reality. *Thoughts After McLuhan* written by his son Eric focuses on the projects and on the ideas around the research, the man and the deliveries related to Marshall McLuhan and their reception immediately after his death. To close the invited papers session, in his short intertext *Marshall McLuhan and Sholem Aleichem*, Paul Levinson presents a compared reflection on Mark Twain and Sholem Aleichem by McLuhan to explore the genius of both writers.

The second part of the 'messages', including a selection of the best papers for each panel of the *McLuhan Galaxy*, held in Barcelona, 23-25 May, opens indeed with a reflection on the convergence between media, focusing first on writing and orality. As Gibson argues in her *Tradition into text: Plato's dialogues and the literate revolution*, there is a tension and inconsistency between the arguments concerning the radical division between oral and written forms as represented by Homer and Plato and the conception of a 'frontier' of 'merging' and 'interplay' between different media systems, with Plato marking the point of this convergence. The same concept of 'merging' and 'interplay' is also particularly relevant in education, where McLuhan's vision proves to be a good way to think about new interactive learning environments, as Espinosa and Medina discuss in their *Learning in digital media. The legacy of McLuhan and his impact on formal education*. Together with new environments, digital technology has also introduced a new concept of disintermediation or re-intermediation (also called *cyberintermediation*) in the generation and distribution of knowledge which could lead to big transformations of our educational institutions. To what extent is this phenomenon reshaping the traditional role of the university? This is the key question raised and discussed in *Death of university? Knowledge production and distribution in the disintermediation era* by Kuklinski, Cobo and Scolari. Following these papers on the convergence of old and new media in writing and education, the next one, *From tactile to magic: McLuhan, changing sensorium and contemporary culture* by Chiara Giaccardi explores the changing of sensorium, the new role of tactility in the relational space of the net and the possible 'new magical thinking' fostered by the new media environment. Cultural changes related to new media is also the main concern of the last paper of this section, *L. I. N. K. faculty understanding connections, making connections* by Matteo Andreozzi which takes into consideration the revision of the cultural paradigm of Western anthropocentric civilization with a special focus on the ecological and social crisis of our century.

Convergence of media and sensorial expression in new environments are also the topics of the section *On the air*, which features an interview with Derrick de Kerckhove by Emanuela Patti on traditional writing and digital language, on text and hypertext, on literarity and hyper-literarity. Drawing inspiration from Isou's lectrism, Rimbaud's *Voyelles* and Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, de Kerckhove discusses the concept of 'electronic lectrism' as a new form of augmented digital literarity. The interview rethinks traditional concepts such as authorship, readership and identity comparing literary and digital dimensions. Convergence, again, is the key word of the following section, *Media Ecology*, a research niche the Journal intends to encourage, related to McLuhan's thought, but officially defined by Neil Postman as 'the study of media as environments'. In brief, Media Ecology studies the ways in which the interaction between media and human beings give a culture its character and, one might say, help a culture to maintain symbolic balance. Scolari argues that beyond the semantic origin of media ecology it is clear that this conception did not

arise from spontaneous generation nor from a stroke of genius from McLuhan or Postman. Both old and new 'McLuhanesque' media ecologists contributed to the underpinning idea of this research field: 'in a scenario marked by the consolidation of global information networks, convergence processes and the explosion of new media and communication platforms, the appearance of transmedia narratives and the eruption of a paradigm of many-to-many communication, breaking the traditional model of broadcasting, media ecology becomes an almost essential reference for understanding these processes'. The implicit idea of 'thinking-outside-the-box' supporting this interdisciplinary approach to culture was also the key concept of McLuhan's DEW (Distant Early Warning) Line, which Alexis Kuskis describes in the section *Media Archeology*, a brilliant re-signifying practice to point at the important role of art and artists as 'lateral thinkers' and 'culture forerunners'. This is the reason why for the review section *From the Gutenberg Galaxy* we decided to choose the professional category of artists (Stephen Kovats, Elaine Brodie, Cristina Miranda de Almeida) who will comment on McLuhan's *Counterblast*.

Enjoy this new first issue.

Matteo Ciastellardi and Emanuela Patti

Editorial Directors