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The messenger was a medium

Reviewed by Michael R. LeGault

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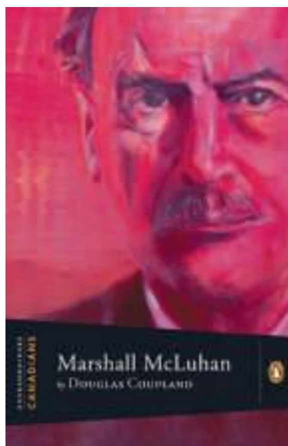
Anyone over the age of roughly 40 can remember, however vaguely, a pre-Internet society and doing quaint, time-consuming things such as talking to people and going to the library. Members of this cohort – the subject, no doubt, of future public-television documentaries – can attest to being blithely unaware of the grinding struggle of life before the Web, sort of along the lines of "we were poor but didn't know it."

If the effects of on-line existence were limited to shifting the way we book flights or send greeting cards, it would merely be an innovation of consequence, one more trick, like driving a car, we learn in order to function efficiently. But the Internet hasn't just changed how we do things; it has changed us, contracting our attention spans (I've checked my e-mail three times since I began writing this), diminishing our tolerance of the written word, heightening our sensitivity of time and arguably altering our perceptions, needs and desires.



Marshall McLuhan, by Douglas Coupland, Penguin Canada, 251 pages, $26

And this, Douglas Coupland refreshes us, is why Marshall McLuhan "was right on the money four decades ahead of the biggest shift in human communication since the printing press," when he quipped "the medium is the message." The *way* we communicate, we can see now in a way we couldn't see then, is potentially a thousand times more subversive than *what* we communicate.

As we Google and text our way through this electronic landscape, the ghost of McLuhan is with us every step of the way, even if many are oblivious to it – my random survey of teenagers and young adults reveals, at best, a nominal recognition of the man. He is whispering across the span of several generations, pointing out the new, non-linear dimensions of social space. He consoles us with his dispassionate, dense, koan-like metaphors and analogies, which seem to describe and anticipate the "terrors" of an increasingly emotional, uprooted culture fond of jumping to conclusions and unable to discern nuance and establish simple fact.

His "global village," came long before formalized free trade and Thomas Friedman. His idea (totally incomprehensible when he proposed it), that as we move away from the word and toward the pictorial we become more tribal, appears to have come to fruition as society splinters into thousands of competing special interest groups and NGOs that seem, at times, on the verge of undermining the premises of representative democracy. Most surprisingly, he is here fighting against the current, hewing to the belief that language is still mankind's most important technological invention.

On this last point Coupland, recruited by John Ralston Saul to author one in a series of biographies on eminent Canadians, is adamant: The University of Toronto English professor – who did his doctoral thesis on the 16th-century pamphleteer Thomas Nashe, fed off the ideas of Harold Innis and loved James Joyce – loathed the new electronic world he was describing. He was not the cool, technological Utopian loved by youth and media of the 1960s and reviled by old-school literati. Mere canary in the coal mine McLuhan may have been, but Coupland also makes it clear that he relished the spotlight and helped mould his image as futurist by remaining neutral in his pronouncements about electronic technology. Coupland believes the accidental hipster was motivated less by fame than intellectual freedom. "By now, the absence of a moral stance or judgment was a deliberate strategy … Moral indignation is often a salve for people unable or unwilling to understand."

While McLuhan's books such as *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding the Media* won critical acclaim and sold well, his prose could be impenetrable. McLuhan also spewed his fair share of nonsense. One particularly dubious contribution was his concept of "hot" and "cool" media. McLuhan posited that information-rich hot media, such as books and cinema, allow for less mental participation than information-strapped cool media, such as television or speech. Indisputably, television and print are two completely different mediums; however, today McLuhan's characterization appears to have far less science in it than it does a conjuring of profound-sounding apocryphal pop pissoir.

McLuhan's gift, Coupland observes, was pattern recognition, and the founder of U of T's Centre for Culture and Technology came of age in an era of pattern recognizers. Unlike Northrop Frye or Jacques Derrida, whose fame did not extend much beyond academic circles, McLuhan possessed a telegenic quality that made him a natural on TV and a media star. Pull up a YouTube clip from that era and one can see that quality emanated from a likable, glib self-assurance. It also came about, ironically, not despite the obtuseness of his ideas, but because of them – a comment itself on the medium of TV: interesting being preferred over understandable.

Coupland's trim, likeable biography is fittingly non-linear in structure, including lots of reader-friendly white space, lists of serial word associations, passages from his new, McLuhan-channeled novel *Generation A* and a 50-question quiz appraising the extent of autistic traits in adults. Coupland provides just enough background to make his subject real; but he mostly eschews intense biographical analysis, preferring to flesh out the psycho-biological origins of McLuhan's ideas, a form, he floats, that might be called a pathography.

The approach reaches out to a younger generation of readers; at any rate, seems to be a tacit recognition – one that McLuhan could appreciate – that in our electronic age books cannot continue to be written in the same way they've always been written and hope to find a measurable audience.

Michael LeGault is the author of Think! Why Crucial Decisions Can't Be Made in the Blink of an Eye

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