

MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY IN MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S 'THEORY OF MEDIA'

Bhashkra Charya
Research Student
Dept. of English and MEL,
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow - 226007

Abstract

The paper aims to interpret the developing electronic media culture that was introduced in the 1960s' by Marshall McLuhan. His book *Understanding Media: The Extensions Man* was celebrated as key insights into the role of the media in contemporary society. McLuhan became one of the most discussed and debated theorists of the time. He provides provocative theses on the role of the media and new technology in constituting the contemporary world. He also provides important and influential models of the media as all-powerful and autonomous social forces that produce a wide range of effects. In this paper, I will illuminate the McLuhan's media theory and how it can be deployed to produce analyses of modernity and postmodernity. I lay out what I consider the important contributions of the work, *Understanding Media*. I also explain the political implications of his media theory and to point to alternative theoretical and political perspectives on the contemporary moment. It deals with McLuhan's print culture that is succeeded by electronic culture and technology. The Paper focuses to the interconnectedness of the village to the 'globe' through media technology. Thus, it becomes 'global village'.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Electronic, Globe, Media, Modernity, Postmodernity and Technology.

Marshall McLuhan was acclaimed worldwide for his works: *Understanding Media, The Mechanical Bride* (1951), *The Guttenberg Galaxy* (1962), and *The Medium is the Massage* (1967). In the 1960s and 1970s he was considered as one of the most influential media theorists. He is widely discussed and debated in the computer era. His works of the early phase are formed the importance of television, electronic broadcasting and entertainment media on contemporary society. McLuhan tells the role of television and electronic culture from the print era and producing a new electronic age. He anticipated the rise and importance of computer culture and the dramatic emergence and effects of personal computers and the Internet. These aspects provide even more substance to McLuhan's claim that contemporary society is undergoing a fundamental rupture with the past.

Indeed, McLuhan can be read in the light of classical social theory. He was a major theorist of modernity, with an original and insightful analysis of the origins, nature, and the path

of the modern world. Moreover, he can be read as a major interpreter of postmodern theories, with a rupture of modernity. He leaves the previous print-industrial, urban-mechanical era and enters a new postmodern society with novel forms of culture and society. McLuhan's work proposes a new medium of communication. He changes the relation of the senses, the models of everyday life, manners of social contacts and messages.

For McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, requires understanding the form of the media and its factual effects on the consciousness, society, and common life. McLuhan offers an entire vision of civilization and the past. His analyses are based on evolution within stages of the past unfolding from one principal medium of communication to another. He portrays the progress from a verbal culture to the spoken word to print tradition generated by the written word to electronic culture produced by electronic media of communication. Verbal culture is extremely participatory and engages all the senses. It corresponds for McLuhan to "tribal culture" with permanent position, relatively firm and fixed values and organization, and a highly integrated culture and social organization.

This stage, roughly extending from premodern times to the revival, is followed by publishing tradition that is based on the printed word and is systematized in the book. With the development of the printing press and wide-spread dissemination of the book and print media, a whole new "Gutenberg Galaxy" of cultural forms emerged. It is characterized by disconnected individualism and the ideals of logic, wisdom and disagreement. McLuhan's print culture is succeeded by electronic culture and technology. For him, this era demonstrates a new tribalism. The concept of "global village" plays a vital role to understand the media theory. Individuals all over the world experience the identical events and spectacles and come to share a new media and universal consciousness and experience in global village. Disintegration and isolation of the individual is allegedly conquered in the new tribal tradition as individuals deeply contribute in media structures and proceedings. It creates a new sensibility beyond the conceptual individualism and rationalism of the earlier era and the nationalism and xenophobia's of the modern era.

McLuhan's analyses of print technology, newspapers, books, modern industry and mechanization, all illuminate the constitution of the modern world and provide new insights into modernity. His description of specific technologies and how they produced the modern era and anticipation of how new emergent electronic technologies are fashioning a new postmodern era. McLuhan, like Baudrillard, Jameson, and other theorists of the postmodernism presents an ideal sort investigation in which modernity is manifested by linearity, differentiation, explosion, and fundamentalization. By contrast, postmodernity is manifested by implosion or dedifferentiation, decentralization, tribalism, and a new media and computer custom. It would be called cyberspace and which would be theorized by Baudrillard and other postmodern theorists. McLuhan opens *Understanding Media* writing:

. . . after three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages, we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned . . . Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society,

much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. (McLuhan 3-4)

For McLuhan, the modern era is characterized by an “explosion” of technologies, cities, states and empires, intellectual forms, forms of communication, and, of course, media. The generating force of the development was produced by the book and technology of the printing press. It made possible due to reading books mutely and humanizing its own subjectivity. It was opposed to the rote collectivism of medieval education and sacred ceremonies. The *Understanding Media* gave rise to national cultures, literatures and the new national states used print technology to generate ideology, and writing. It also offers the logical organization of production bound up with the rise of capitalism.

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan represents satisfied insights into specific cultural phenomena and particular media. His insight of publishing technology helped to bring a discrimination of verse, song, expression, text, and news at the beginning of the modern era. It also helped to produce societal segregation, specific jobs, the modern university, and divisions within culture and society. McLuhan notes:

. . . print technology and the written word was the first mass technology, the first teaching machine, and helped generate modern education, culture, and society. . . . Compared to the Chinese ideogram or Medieval illustrated handwritten manuscripts, the book and print technology was highly abstract, linear, and homogenized, helping produce distinctive Western and modern modes of thought. (McLuhan 91)

For McLuhan, “. . . printing from movable types was the first mechanization of a complex handicraft and the archetype of all subsequent mechanization” (173) and helped to create the industrialist mode of construction. In addition, “typography ended parochialism and tribalism, psychically and socially, both in space and time” (173), by enabling and replacement of ideas and cosmopolitanism. Printing made possible indifference and non-involvement, producing balanced concept and evaluation, but also disintegration and occupation. Further ‘correct’—spelling, manner, and thought are a result of automation and the linear association of experience, information, and occupation, producing a need to be comprehensible and accurate. Religion too shifted from ritual and literary to announcing and incorporating the Word with the heap invention of the Bible. Complementing McLuhan, one might note that Descartes duplicates this formational necessity of typography machinery in his foundation of philosophy in “clear and distinct ideas” (175), an orderly succession of thought, and conceptual and balanced concepts, so giving rise to a distinguishing appearance of modern Western philosophy.

For McLuhan the rise of new media is not an accumulation, or complement, to preceding media and structures of culture, but a fiery force that contends with other media. He uses the metaphor of war to illustrate the process through which publishing replaced the verbal convention of learning and education. It also displaces language for the new rule of reading and writing. McLuhan presents brilliant impending into the role of the media within modernity and how the media work as key components of culture and humanity. It is probably his concept of a shatter with modernity and beginning of a new postmodern era. I propose that really McLuhan is important and significant today as the theorist of a new manner of culture and the past in the contemporary era. Because, television could not really bear the weight of constituting a break the evolution to a new historical era that he planned. Television was visibly a important media and had wonderful effects.

Therefore, McLuhan debatably overstated the role of TV and other forms of electronic communication in the 1960s which could not genuine his claim. We were moving into a new electronic traditions, a new stage of the past, and a vital break with the past. More insensitively, one could fall out that McLuhan's categories were not that useful for theorizing the difficulty of TV and its imbrications in the economy, politics, and common life. McLuhan's claim that TV was an expansion of the central nervous system was difficult and indistinguishable. His media hot and cool distinction did not always work well and were hotly challenged. His disregard for content was short-circuited, detailed reading and evaluation of media content. He failed to theorize the place of television within the corporate economy. It was a blind spot. We could find all these themes in McLuhan's work. His concepts often blocked mounting a critical theory of television. That theorized its relations to the economy, state, public organizations, and culture.

But reading McLuhan anew in the reference of the computer era facilitates him to be seen as a predictor of the cyberspace. He is valuable for anticipating the revolutionary effects of the new computer tradition. He provides concepts that help us to grab the vastness of the evolution, for focusing concentration on how significant new media can be. He helps us to understand the revolution going on. In *Understanding Media*, he writes:

. . . our new electric technology that extends our sense and nerves in a global embrace has large implications for the future of language. Electric technology does not need words any more than the digital computer needs numbers. Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization whatever Such a state of collective awareness may have been the preverbal condition of men. Language as the technology of human extension, whose powers of division and separation we know so well, may have been the 'Tower of Babel' by which men sought to scale the highest heavens Today computers hold out the promises of a means of instant translation of any code or language into any other code or language. The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity. The next logical step would seem to be, not to translate, but to by-pass languages in favor of a general cosmic consciousness which might be very like the collective unconscious dreamt of by Bergson. The condition of 'weightlessness,' that biologists say promises a physical immortality, may be paralleled by the condition of speechlessness that could confer perpetuity of collective harmony and peace. (McLuhan 87)

This passage predicts the innovatory effects of the digitization of culture and the new languages of automatization. It points to the rise of false cleverness and even the fantasies of immortality through virtualization and duplication. It offers a bold vision of how computer culture might construct new forms of worldwide consciousness and global understanding and concord. It points to the enormous potential as well as current impact of the automatization of the world.

In the world of televised publicity, the consumer unintentionally and automatically becomes the maker of product blueprint, as firmed by what ads he or she views. This is what McLuhan was referring to in his 1966 lecture "The Medium is the Massage" claiming that, "The world of electric technology and circuitry as involving the audience as workforce has extraordinary implications" (McLuhan 87). Similarly, in *Counterblast* McLuhan states, "The key fact is that it's the movement of information, itself, in a kind of non-stop global dialogue that makes wealth today" (McLuhan 38). "Time is money", the exhausted cliché probably most

regarding to Wall Street capitalists, has never been more valid than in the 21st century. In the Electronic Age, when all business dealings can be performed by the click of a mouse. Time is on the side of stock traders and ebay purchasers. In addition, *The Global Village* shows that total exposure of world issues is delivered in the form of low-cost communication. Now one satellite is able to talk” to another satellite. (McLuhan and Powers 118)

As forecasted by McLuhan, the television (and the Internet) involves the whole globe in “a community of continuous learning . . .” (129). Thus, the global village makes information all together available to one and all. McLuhan argues, “Electric media bring back the village from the distant past where news travels fast” (*McLuhan’s Wake*). In his Marfleet Lectures, McLuhan elucidates what happens in the immediate world of electronic software, further illustrating this “community of continuous learning”; in doing so, his prediction of the Internet is uncannily accurate:

We’re suddenly projected into a world where everything happens at once, that is, electrically. The same information is available at the same moment from every part of the world. Energy is available everywhere at once. And electric retrieval systems enable us to recall anything at all instantly. . . . Electrically, it is possible to put every book in the world and every page of every book in the world on one desktop. (129)

Thus, the media theory of Marshall McLuhan is groundwork for a new procedural form for the study of rising technology. I find that a medium affects the culture in which it plays a role not by the content delivered through it, but by the characteristics of the medium itself. McLuhan presented an example of to the light bulb. A light bulb does not have content in the way. Like a newspaper has articles or a television has programs, yet it is a medium that has a public effect. In the same way a light bulb enables people to create spaces during night that would otherwise be enveloped by darkness. He portrays the light bulb as a medium without any content “The medium is the message” is a phrase which means that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message, producing a symbiotic affiliation by which the medium persuades how the message is professed.

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