

**Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.**

Greening the Media

# The Fantasies of Marshall McLuhan

Why we're not celebrating the 50th anniversary of his major work

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There's a wonderful scene in Woody Allen's 1977 film *Annie Hall* where Allen's character berates a know-it-all Columbia University professor who is standing near him in the ticket line to a movie and expounding loudly on the work of Marshall McLuhan. To settle the argument, Allen pulls the real McLuhan into the sequence and asks what he thinks of this blowhard.

"I heard what you were saying," says McLuhan. "You know nothing of my work. You mean my whole fallacy is wrong. How you ever got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing."

In a funny way, Allen captured a truth about McLuhan's supposed prestige as a media commentator: it was a performance. The crack about the fallacy of his work might be a throwaway line, but it could easily be read as a taunt to anyone who took McLuhan seriously.

The film marks something else significant: McLuhan was one of the very few theorists of the media to make a mark on popular culture, such that audiences to *Annie Hall* would have recognized him (though he was not Allen's first choice for the part—Federico Fellini and Luis Buñuel turned him down). Looking back recently on his heyday, the Al Jazeera TV network noted that McLuhan's influence was both widespread and powerful. It's notable that his work appeared as articles and interviews everywhere from *Look* to *Playboy*. The *San Francisco Chronicle* called him "the hottest academic property around."<sup>1</sup>

We've been wondering about the success of McLuhan's book *Understanding Media*, which is currently being celebrated for its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Part of his appeal surely lay in the fact that so many scholars in the 1960s simply denounced the media, especially television, for supposedly dominating viewers and molding their minds. Conversely, he imagined a new world being made by the interaction of electronics and emotions, inputs and ideas, plugs and people.

But there are problems with these ideas, as we learnt from reading *Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan*, a book written in 1968 by the cultural critic Sidney Finkelstein.<sup>2</sup>

It was the height of the Vietnam War and Finkelstein was troubled that McLuhan could disassociate his thinking from the real horror of that conflict to argue that it marked the evolution of superior technology.

Finkelstein also condemned McLuhan's assertion that a common humanity would flow from the electronic media. He regarded this as an apolitical claim mired in racist paternalism: that the media would generate a peaceful global village and magically end African-American poverty, youth protest, and anti-colonial conflict. For a more realistic view of media power, we suggest reading the section of the 1968 Kerner Commission report on civil disorders entitled "The Communications Media, Ironically, Have Failed to Communicate."<sup>3</sup>

Finkelstein concluded that the "McLuhanese fantasy" was obscuring the fact that "interlocking industrial corporations" were achieving ever-greater "control of the world's natural resources, labor and markets." Worse

still, *Understanding Media* was “an exhortation to people to accept this new world a-coming as their happy fate. People must accept this servitude with docility, for what will control them is only an extension of themselves.”

We think those points were prescient and valid; but they didn’t spell the end of McLuhan’s influence. The torch passed to another populist scholar, Neil Postman, in the early 1970s. By that time, the political and economic forces identified by Finkelstein had solidified. What Finkelstein had found in McLuhan’s idea of the media as a self-organizing extension of humans was the ideological twin of an emergent, soon-to-be prevailing logic which argued that markets were self-organizing, impersonal, and rational extensions of ourselves.

The deleterious impact those fantasies have had since the 1970s is pretty well known—in politics and economics, but also, significantly, in attacks on government protections of the environment and angry denials of climate science, which continue today despite the worsening of the ecological crisis, as shown in the latest report from the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.<sup>4</sup>

It’s significant that Postman recast McLuhan’s ideas as “media ecology.” This idea has nothing to do with natural ecosystems. Here is Postman’s oft-cited statement on the subject: “Technological change ... is ecological. I can explain this best by an analogy. What happens if we place a drop of red dye into a beaker of clear water? Do we have clear water plus a spot of red dye? Obviously not. We have a new coloration to every molecule of water. That is what I mean by ecological change.”<sup>5</sup> But as we have shown in this column, the story is more complex and less metaphorical, given the environmental impact of making, using, and discarding media technologies.

McLuhan actually argued that nature was obsolete, thanks to media technology. He even had a date for when it happened: 1957, the year the Sputnik space shot circumnavigated the globe: “the planet became programmable content” and “[e]cology was born.”<sup>6</sup> The Earth was now “an art form.”

In the context of our ecological crisis, such claims and metaphors divert attention from very urgent challenges, misdirecting us towards a fantasy of environmentally benign media technologies.

We acknowledge the strikingly unusual ways that McLuhan’s ideas took hold beyond the academy—but we regret that they embody notions of unfettered consumption and market ideology that imperil the very world that hosts them.

1. <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listeningpost/2013/04/20134683632515956.html>; “The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan.” *Playboy* March 1969.
2. Sidney Finkelstein, *Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan*. International Publishers Co Inc., 1968.
3. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6553>
4. [http://ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/SYR\\_AR5\\_LONGERREPORT.pdf](http://ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/SYR_AR5_LONGERREPORT.pdf)
5. Neil Postman, “Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change.” March 1998. <http://web.cs.ucdavis.edu/~rogaway/classes/188/materials/postman.pdf>.
6. Marshall McLuhan, “The Rise and Fall of Nature.” *Journal of Communication* Volume 27, Issue 4, December 1977: 80-81.



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