



McLuhan Program
In Culture and Technology

The Cultural Paradox of the Global Village

by

**Mark Federman
Chief Strategist,
McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology
University of Toronto**

Keynote Presentation



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The Cultural Paradox of the Global Village

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What is the culture of a place that is everywhere and nowhere, that is at once global but renders the globe obsolete, that globalizes the individual yet strips our individuality? The place to which I am referring is the Internet, and these questions represent the intriguing paradox that the Internet presents to us, one that requires us to look beyond what we can easily see or hear or touch.

When we first began to think about the Internet many of us typically thought of a television metaphor. It is not hard to understand why we might immediately make this connection. We view both media through a screen, and screen-oriented technologies often have common effects. Both have a remote control of sorts — in the case of networked computers, the remote control is the mouse — and, like television, we are always clicking and searching for what else is on. And clearly, there is no shortage of paid advertising, product placements and infomercials on either medium.

Television is a convenient and obvious metaphor for the Internet. In fact, we often use convenient and obvious metaphors for any new technologies that are based on how we use things, or on their content, in an attempt to understand their nature and characteristics. But over time, we slowly discover that our first, and often second and third, impressions were, if not wrong, then most certainly incomplete. And this is because we tend to base our initial thinking and reactions on the things we notice. So perhaps we should ask a different question. Like...

What haven't you noticed lately? What HAVEN'T you noticed lately?

There's a cute story about a man who, during wartime, would come to the country's border with a wheelbarrow full of dirt. The border guard looked at the man's papers and all was in order for him to cross. But the guard was certain the man was smuggling some sort of contraband in the wheelbarrow. So the guard took a shovel, poked around in the dirt, but found nothing. The man was allowed to cross.

The next week, the man once again comes to the border with a wheelbarrow full of dirt. Again, the border guard found that the papers were in order and dug through the dirt, but still found nothing. And again, the man was allowed to cross. Week after week, it was the same story: Man approaches the border with wheelbarrow full of dirt. Guard finds nothing of interest and the man crosses. At the end of the war, the guard sees the man and asks him: "Look, I know you were smuggling something across the border, but I could never find a



thing hidden in the dirt. What were you smuggling all those years?” The man answered: “Wheelbarrows.”

The border guard was unable to perceive what had been right there under his nose for years, simply because it did not match his conception. As we attempt to discover the nature and effects of any new technology or innovation or undertaking, we naturally draw on what we already know and what we obviously notice. We then create a mental model of how the new thing is supposed to work and react. We create conceptions, and then manage our affairs in an attempt to match those preconceived notions.

But we are not necessarily effective, that is, we often do not achieve the overall desired effects. Why do I say this? Simply because, what we conceive about our enterprises and institutions is not sufficient to fully understand all the effects that are actually happening in and around our enterprises and institutions. Like the border guard in the story, we are completely unable to perceive all of the dynamics of our environment because our *conception* limits our *perception*. Years of schooling and conditioning in the business world controls what we believe. And, what we believe controls what we are able to see.

What haven't you noticed lately? This is really an odd question, because, how can you notice that which you haven't yet noticed? And if, as I am proposing to you, this is a key question for awareness in our complex interconnected society, even if we answer it once, how can we consistently continue to answer it?

Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to achieve the requisite awareness of what we haven't noticed while we are immersed in a comfortable, or at least accustomed, environment. We are all subject to the ground-rules, that is, the rules and unperceived effects that govern our ground or context. It is like asking a fish to suddenly become aware of water. Marshall McLuhan, the visionary who gave us “The Medium is the Message” and the “Global Village,” observed, “One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water, since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in.” It is only when it is pulled from the water that the fish becomes acutely aware of its former environment. The challenge in achieving the awareness to notice the formerly unnoticed — what we call achieving “integral awareness” of our total environment — is to create an appropriate “anti-environment.”

We tend to notice many things. In fact, we're very good at noticing what is entirely obvious, to the extent that we often become obsessively focused on it. This is dangerously easy to do because in our world of instantaneous communications, everyone is vying for the most precious and valuable commodity to be sought — our attention. Think about it: Every advertiser, every potential vendor and company desperately wants your attention, and will go to great, and sometimes outrageous, lengths to obtain it. If attention is the most valuable commodity, our most valued asset, it may be said that the most valuable personal skill to be effective these days is ignorance, literally ignore-ance — the ability to selectively and



appropriately ignore that which is irrelevant or merely distracting. In this context, ignorance is not bliss — it is the practical manifestation of acute awareness and heightened perception.

The challenge is a tricky one: We must create an anti-environment so that we can ignore what we notice and notice what we ignore. Moreover, we need to find the questions that we have not asked after we've asked everything we can think of. We need to raise the issues that have not yet occurred to us. And perhaps most important, we must anticipate the effects that have already happened of things that we are about to do. In other words, our objective is nothing less than to achieve the ability to predict the future by foretelling the present.

After such a build-up, I'm almost tempted to say, "to find out more, have your credit card ready and dial the toll-free number on your screen..." But I won't. Instead, I will reveal to you all at least one of the secrets behind Marshall McLuhan's uncanny ability to, indeed, predict the future by foretelling the present. The tool I'm talking about is the Laws of Media.

The Laws of Media: They are precisely four aspects or effects that apply without exception to all creations of humankind — everything we conceive or create. In McLuhan's lexicon, "medium" is not merely limited to our conventional idea of mass-media: radio, television, the press, the internet. Rather, a medium refers to anything from which a change emerges. And since some sort of change in us or society accompanies anything we conceive or create, all of our tools and technologies, policies and plans, a cup of coffee or a coup d'état — they are all McLuhan media. The Laws of Media apply regardless of whether the creation is tangible or intangible, abstract or concrete, and they serve to reveal the nature and effects of our innovations relative to us. Now to Marshall McLuhan, the questions were always more important, and indeed, more revealing, than the answers. Thus, the four Laws of Media are framed as four questions or probes.

The first probe is asked like this: What does the thing — the artefact, the medium — extend, enhance, intensify, accelerate or enable? We can ask this question about any product, any service, any initiative, any policy. We can ask this enhance question about any word or phrase in our vocabulary, including, most interestingly, our buzzwords and acronyms. Email, for example, enhances and accelerates our ability to communicate in writing. Its rapidity and characteristic terseness intensifies the sender's meaning.

A second probe: When pushed or extended beyond the limits of its potential, the new thing will tend to reverse what had been its original characteristics. Into what does the new medium reverse? So, continuing with email as an example, it enhances our ability to communicate, but when extended beyond the limit of its potential — with spam, for instance, or dozens of unimportant FYI- or CC-type of corporate emails — email reverses into no communication at all due to an overflowing inbox.

The third Law of Media probe: If some aspect of a situation or a thing is enhanced or enlarged, simultaneously, something else is displaced. What is pushed aside or obsolesced by



the new thing; the new medium? Now when I say “obsolescence,” I do not mean that the older form is eliminated, never to be heard from again. In fact, it is quite the opposite: One sure sign of a medium in obsolescence is its ubiquity. Does everyone remember what happened right before the dot-com bubble burst? There was a saying then: “You know the end of the market is near when you’re getting stock advice from your garbage collector.” So what does email obsolesce? In a corporate setting, email obsolesced the interoffice memo, and those large brown envelopes tied with a string that had all those boxes for a chain of recipients. It also obsolesces synchronicity in communications – the ability to respond instantly as in normal conversation – and other socialized skills of responding to aural or physical cues, in other words, body language and tone of voice.

And the final Law of Media probe: What does the new medium retrieve from the past that had been formerly obsolesced? This reflects the aphorism that, “there’s nothing new under the sun,” and essentially asks, “How did we react as a society the last time we saw a medium with analogous effects?” The law of retrieval brings in precedence and historically-based experience. So what does email retrieve from the past that has long been obsolesced? Thinking way back through the history of communications, email may retrieve Hermes the messenger, scribe and herald of Greek mythology. Interestingly, from the perspective of the retrieval aspect of email, Hermes was also the Greek god of commerce, invention, cunning and theft. Has anyone here received a confidential business proposition from Nigeria lately?

The Laws of Media are simultaneous effects — emergent properties, really — of anything we conceive or create. What does it extend, enhance, amplify or enable? When pushed beyond the limit of its capacity into what does it reverse? What does it obsolesce? And, what does it retrieve from the past that was formerly obsolesced?

By applying Marshall McLuhan’s thinking, we understand that the nature of a medium is known by its effects – these Laws of Media effects – on us and on society. In particular, we know that the most potent effects are those that are unseen, non-obvious or simply ignored – the ground-effects. Consider the effect of television: TV brings the outside world in – from a soundstage, a political platform or a theatre of war directly into our homes. In doing so, television changed not only the nature of entertainment, but of politics and war as well in ways that were not at all obvious to television’s pioneers.

The effect of the Internet is quite different from that of television. Via networked computers, instead of bringing the world into our homes, we transport ourselves from our homes, and indeed from our bodies, out into cyberspace. So what is this Internet world into which we are transported? What has been created in cyberspace? What awaits us there? And more important, what transformations are occurring right now that we have not yet noticed?

McLuhan gave us a guide when he distinguished between “visual space” and “acoustic space.” While these metaphors usefully tie to two of our senses, they do not necessarily relate exclusively to that which is seen or heard. Visual space is linear and bounded. It is ordered



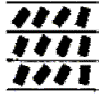
and continuous, yet continually fragmented by our eye's (and brain's) automatic process of grouping and classification. In contrast, McLuhan described acoustic space as "a resonant sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose boundaries are nowhere," a world of "simultaneous relationships." Therefore, everywhere in acoustic space is here, and every-when in acoustic space is now. This describes the effect of the Internet perfectly, an ever-present presence, the world of simultaneous relationships.

We can make an additional observation from the interesting metaphor of visual and acoustic space. McLuhan points out that a characteristic of "visual space" is that we can shut it out, in much the same way we can shut off our vision by closing our eyes. We have eyelids, but we have no "earlids." We cannot shut out acoustic space, or the space of relationships and connections that are all around us. This suggests that we cannot shut out the effects of the Internet on our business and society, even if we choose not to use the Internet directly. In other words, we, in our physical reality, are affected by the changes that have their impetus in cyberspace.

In cyberspace, we literally go "out of our minds," not to insanity, where we lose our sense of reality, but to an extension of reality that offers us many more dimensions of experience. As McLuhan predicted, "having extended ... our central nervous system into the electromagnetic technology, ... [we] transfer our consciousness to the computer world as well." So how can we begin to understand the effects of this profound change in the way we experience, and connect with, our world?

My mother witnessed the invention of television when she was a girl – from her ground, she always wondered how to get the little people out of the box. I grew up in an age in which the television was a fixture – almost, but not quite, taken for granted. I was socialized into a society where seeing events as they occurred on the other side of the world didn't merit a second thought. But to actually communicate and interact with many people from all around the world simultaneously – and perhaps even assume multiple personalities while doing so – well, my wonderment was equivalent to my mother's fascination with the miniature George Burns, Gracie Allen and Jack Benny.

My children, however, are now socialized in a world in which instantaneous connections from anywhere to anywhere at any time is ordinary. It's a world in which people quite naturally assume multiple identities, and play multiple roles, throughout the day both online and off. Techno-schizophrenia is not only considered normal, it's almost expected! At a time in our history when these sorts of phenomena are accepted as a common state of being, people will not only have different expectations from society and from each other, but they will acquire a significantly different worldview that even transcends time and space. The techno-psychological mantra, "Everywhere is here and every-when is now," becomes the perceptible underpinning of a reality that represents the McLuhan reversal – the evolution – of our perception and experience of the world.



In this world, the fact of such extreme connectivity reverses our notion of cultural connections and citizenship. When borders and time zones dissolve, we literally become citizens of the world. Our socialization then yields a different sort of cultural awareness that we see manifested in the popularity of world music, and the rise of global political movements like the Green Party. It is manifested in the global scope of a variety of non-governmental institutions and independent media, involving everything from sports and philanthropy to business and politics. And it is manifested in the spread of English as a universal world language.

Now I realize that this notion of a universal world language may cause a few ears to perk up at this particular conference. So let's spend a few moments to explore this potentially controversial issue. The idea of a universal world language is quite consistent with our understanding of the effects of instantaneous communications technologies, and well-grounded in historical precedent. When Gutenberg created the moveable type press, we saw two key effects among many. First, with the mass distribution of printed books, a person's ideas could suddenly be transported in multiple directions, for quite a substantial distance, without the person. Second, the capacity to produce printed materials suddenly exceeded the ability of authors to produce content in Latin, which was the predominant language of ideas at the time. As nature abhors a vacuum, so too does the ability to publish and disseminate ideas. Thus, we saw a significant reinforcement and acceleration – an extension, intensification and enabling – of vernacular languages that extended to the borders of countries, and later to the far reaches of empires, roughly corresponding to the distances that printed materials could travel. Literacy increased in those vernacular languages. The ability to both read and write, engendered the materials that filled the void of content creation for a medium that could be produced in relatively large volumes by printing presses. The content that was once global – largely teachings of the Church – became considerably localized, reinforcing and strengthening nationalistic tendencies and sensibilities.

We now have the next acceleration of content creation and distribution with electric technologies — first television and now, the Internet. The distribution mechanisms are global in reach, and have a production capacity that exceeds that of all the printing presses worldwide by several orders of magnitude. Based on our understanding of the history of communications, we would expect two things to happen: One, the number of authors and content creators should increase, and so should the volume of content being produced. Two, we would expect to see the adoption of a common language throughout the area that corresponds to the reach of the distribution mechanism. What has happened? Where we once were passive consumers of content, this has reversed so that we have become prolific producers of content, throughout our electronic technologies. On television, we see hundreds of channels, ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous (although most nights, there still is nothing worth watching!). On the Internet, there are more web pages than McDonald's has hamburgers – billions and billions served, with everything from PhD dissertations to the details of a teenager's latest date. Second, even though almost every language on the planet is represented on the Internet and on specialty television, in every country there is a rapidly growing number of people who can understand, and speak, English – especially among youth.



So what does this change? An immediate and obvious fear is that globalization would lead to the homogenization of culture. It is a fear that I heard eloquently expressed by Prof. Suichi Kato in EU-Japan Fest conference entitled, “The Role of Culture in an Age of Advancing Globalization.” Prof. Kato argued that technology converts culture into a commodity, mass producing and exporting cultural artefacts according to the rules of capitalism. The “law of the jungle” applies in which the strong will survive and overpower the weak. This results in a homogenizing effect that eliminates local, indigenous cultures. According to Kato-san, in Japan, “internationalization” today essentially means “Americanization” through culture becoming commodity via technology and market economics. However, what Kato-san may term “cultural imperialism” is a conception influenced by several hundred years of history that was grounded in a world of linearity and mechanization.

But it makes no sense to merely extrapolate the past into the future. We must instead foretell the present. The fear expressed by Kato-san emanates from an industrial age ground and reflects the uniformity and homogenization that are artefacts of a mechanized era that began with the Gutenberg press. However, as we have just noticed, English as a universal language is not an instance of cultural imperialism, but a natural effect of instantaneous communications that ironically, the world at large need not fear. This possibly surprising conclusion is borne from noticing the even more surprising observation that the advantage currently enjoyed by native English speakers in international dealings is, in effect, entering its obsolescence.

Remember, we are now living at the time of only the first generation to really feel the effects of the universality of English. We know that language culturally, and cognitively, conditions the mind. Over time, generations of non-native English speakers, who will become fluent in English, and often in one or two additional languages as well, will have the natural advantage. It is they who will readily be able to accept the new cultural forms and fusion that are the distinctive hallmark, not of globalization, but of our response to the effects of globalization.

So what is our response to the effects of Globalization? It is not the anarchy of the NoLogo crowd, although some amount of anarchy may be useful to get the world’s attention. Rather, our response to the effects of globalization is *Globalism*, a term coined by McLuhan Program director Derrick de Kerckhove to describe the new personal ethics and responsibilities that we as global citizens must assume and adopt. McLuhan warned of the potential effects of Global Village when he told us, “The more you create village conditions, the more discontinuity and division and diversity. The global village absolutely insures maximal disagreement on all points. It never occurred to me that uniformity and tranquillity were the properties of the global village ... I don’t *approve* of the global village. I say we live in it.” But McLuhan also reminds us that, “there is absolutely no inevitability so long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.” In other words, he tells us not only to predict, but also to create, the future by foretelling the present.

While Globalism does not represent anarchy, it is subversive in its power to discover new processes in what we would call “the new modernity.” In the first part of the 20th century, what we called modernism in literature, art, architecture and philosophy was based on reality



and the symbolism that was unique to each society. It was used to express the understanding of a society's culture, history and philosophical ground. The second modernity, characteristic of the mid to late 20th century, stripped the symbolic significance from things we created and emphasized their functionality, sometimes to the exclusion of their aesthetics. This we called postmodernism. Second modernity is characterized by juxtaposition of incongruities, and oxymoronic conjunctions of culture, traditions and über-modern expressionism. It is a world of figure against figure, creating a new ground or context that is divorced from a conventional cultural ground traditionally tied to geographic locale – in fact, it often pits the local in direct conflict with global – and thereby attempts to create its own new meaning. Most people, who were not members of the avant-garde, or the too-hip-for-the-room crowd, were repulsed, or at the very least, unimpressed. And it was often the specific intention of the creators of post-modern culture to be repulsive.

The new modernity – post-postmodernism, if you dare – is something different. It is experiential, as opposed to prescribed, pre-scripted and doctrinaire in its constructive chaos. Previously, physical objects in relation to local geography allowed us to determine much about identity. Now, in an age of instantaneous communications that eliminates the effects of geographical distance and time zones, identity is oriented by means of “scapes” that juxtapose multiple diverse environments from around the world. Thus the future, especially for emerging societies, is always elsewhere, constantly in flux, formed according to relational, as opposed to regional, patterns. Trans-national traffic of ideas and experiences that are now abstract, form a new order that is ironically and paradoxically unstable, irregular, incomplete and undefined relative to our historical and physical experience. This is the new norm to which we are slowly becoming socialized. It is “broken” in our conventional sense, but that is its virtue in the reformation of a global society. In this case, the state of being broken is not a destructive force but a liberating one. As McLuhan said: “Breakdown is breakthrough.”

In experiencing the new modernity, with all its instability and ambiguity, we each reflexively experience our world and the simultaneous relations that are forging a new global culture. Through an experience that is at once both direct and vicarious, each of us is moved to consider and take action relative to the problems we, as individuals, perceive in the world. Unintended consequences abound, and our ability to be appropriately reflexive is the key to the new organization of our lives and the new modernity. This poses a tremendous opportunity for those who would adopt Globalism as their personal ethic; and a tremendous challenge to nation-states and corporations – and their leaders – who are still tied to conceptions of reactive internationalism that reflect in what we conventionally call globalization, rather than a trans-nationalism that demands a reflexive response in global conscientiousness.

So how does this translate in a practical sense? We are experiencing an interesting, and suitably ironic and paradoxical, instance of Globalism that has arisen courtesy of the George W. Bush administration, the war in Iraq and the world's reflexive response. Regardless of whether your personal politics are for or against the current administration, or whether you support or decry the invasion, the war in Iraq had a significance that transcends the removal



of Saddam Hussein, the ongoing struggle against terrorism and the existence – or not – of Weapons of Mass Destruction. The invasion of Iraq that was undertaken over the objections of many nations made our global village conditions intensely explicit – every person on earth who is within range of the Internet, television or even a radio, realized just how small is our world, and how interconnected we all are, in a way that was unprecedented in human history. For the first time, citizens of the world, imbued with a sense of Globalism, simultaneously protested en masse across every time zone in an attempt to influence what was, *de facto*, a global political process. And global political processes extend beyond mere demonstrations. The ongoing engagement of American soldiers imposes a severe financial burden on the country, a financial burden that could potentially be shared with other developed countries, and one that threatens to be a significant factor in next year's election. Yet by steadfastly refusing to assist the United States – at least for the time being – the world is playing a very active role in what was once exclusively American politics, but now, in a very real and reflexive way, is a matter of world concern. Inadvertently, the Bush administration ignited a spark for the 21st century, an extreme intensification of the mightiest nation in history that resulted in the reversal of nationalism and nationalistic self-interest into Globalism.

What haven't *you* noticed lately? You have all noticed globalization and internationalism as the initial result of our ability to communicate instantly – anywhere and at anytime. You then noticed cultural diversity around the world and the need to localize media and content for indigenous markets. In short, you have noticed the world as it was. The challenge with which we are now faced is to begin to notice the world as it evolves, as it truly is. Globalism does not mean the end of indigenous culture, or the imposition of a mono-culture, but the emergence of new cultural forms. It does not mean the end of nations, or the imposition of a world government, but the emergence of trans-national institutions and ad-hoc organizations founded on relationships and reflexivity. It does not mean an end to localization, but the need to re-examine its underlying assumptions in light of the complexities, ambiguities and paradoxes that characterize the global citizen that lives anywhere and everywhere at precisely the same time – now. And Globalism means one more thing. It means noticing.