

**McLuhan Program**  
In Culture and Technology

## ***The Global Soul* and the Global Village**

by

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**Keynote Presentation**



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## ***The Global Soul and the Global Village***

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### ***[Earth in Space]***

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.

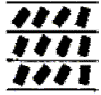
When we first began to think about the Internet many of us typically thought of a television metaphor. It is not hard to understand why we might immediately make this connection. We view both media through a screen, and screen-oriented technologies often have common effects. Both have a remote control 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.

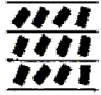
But we are not necessarily effective, that is, we often do not achieve the overall desired effects. Why do I say this? Simply because, what we conceive about our enterprises and institutions is not sufficient to fully understand all the effects that are actually happening in and around our enterprises 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?

### ***[Marshall McLuhan in Thought]***

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.

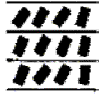
The challenge is a tricky one: We must create an anti-environment so that we can ignore what we notice and notice what we ignore. So how can we accomplish such a topsy-turvy feat? It's actually easier than you might imagine, and I'm willing to bet that most of you have experienced the circumstance that makes such a revelation quite explicit. How many people have had the experience of travelling away from home for at least a couple of weeks, and then, upon returning home, you notice that everything looks different – you observe your former environment through “fresh eyes.” Pico Iyer, the author of *The Global Soul*, describes this psychological phenomenon of awareness that travel manifests. In an interview given to *Mother Earth News* shortly after the publication of *The Global Soul* in 2001, Iyer muses that:

**[Avumba House – New Guinea]**

“I think travelling physically is just a shortcut to thinking about the kind of values and issues that we have to face in our day-to-day lives that sometimes we're blind to because of habit or routine. ... look on your home as if you were a foreigner. Try to imagine how it might look to somebody from the other side of the world who might be actually more alert to its graces and beauties than you are. I think we travel when we fall in love, or when we open a different kind of book, or when we get lost driving a car around our hometown. And I think all those are as valuable as going to the far ends of the earth, as long as we have the ability to appreciate the opportunity they represent and the eyes to accept the possibility. I think travel is mostly a way of breaking out of your familiar self.”

“...travel is mostly a way of breaking out of your familiar self.” In other words, travel is one way of constructing an anti-environment from which the average person can begin to perceive his or her familiar environment, without the restriction imposed by the familiar. Physical travel deals with temporarily changing one's physical, and often cultural, locale. Our conventional idea of travel is wrapped up in our notion of “place-ness,” that is, the physical attributes of a place, and perhaps the characteristics of the different culture that happens to be located *there*. But Iyer refers to travel when “we open a different kind of book” or “when we fall in love.” Travel, expressed in this metaphoric – and metamorphic or transforming – sense, becomes more a matter of changing your perception, or more specifically, changing – that is, transforming – your mind. And, as it turns out, this is entirely the realm of interest of the McLuhan Program here at the University of Toronto.

I began this afternoon by referring to television. Consider its effects: 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?

### **[Dyson Sphere]**

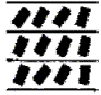
McLuhan gave us a guide when he distinguished between “visual space” and “acoustic space.” While these metaphors usefully tie to two of our senses, they do not necessarily relate exclusively to that which is seen or heard. Visual space is linear and bounded. It is ordered and continuous, yet continually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

### **[Family Television]**

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.

### **[TV Family on iMac]**

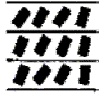
My children, who are of high school and university age, and you, are now socialized in a world in which instantaneous connections from anywhere to anywhere at any time is ordinary. It’s a world in which people quite naturally assume multiple identities, and play multiple roles, throughout the day both 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 an 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.

### **[Earthlights]**

Pico Iyer expresses it well when he notes in that same interview, “When I write about the global soul I’m partly writing about the wonderful possibilities of this new borderless world, and I’m partly writing about the challenges that we have to face.” We often characterize many of these challenges under the collective term, “globalization,” and when we face these challenges, it is important for us to distinguish between the popular visceral response to globalization, and our individual 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.

### **[Slab House]**

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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. But this shifted in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century when a “second modernity” emerged. This new movement, what we called “postmodernism” in architecture and design, stripped the symbolic significance from things we created and emphasized their functionality, sometimes to the exclusion of their aesthetics. In doing so, we found our culture described not by our traditional symbols, but by juxtapositions of incongruities – conjunctions of culture, traditions and über-modern expressionism that were oxymoronic, paradoxical and often, simply made no sense.

We were recreating our world as figure against figure, creating a new ground or context that was divorced from a conventional cultural ground that had been traditionally tied to geographic locale. In fact, it often pit the local in direct conflict with global, and thereby attempted 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.

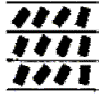
It was against this ground, I think, that Pico Iyer spoke about the challenge we face when there is no ground to give us cultural context or meaning: “The biggest [challenge] is the lack of responsibility. I think of a certain kind of global soul as living in midair--in an airplane six miles above. The danger of that is that it's a realm of all rights and no responsibilities. In some ways I think being a global soul means having to find out what your affiliations are, that what used to be a given is [now] a chosen. My affiliations would be perhaps to people, to values and to the grounding, centering tendencies I carry wherever I go.”

Here, Iyer is describing the nature of what I would call the new modernity – post-postmodernism, if you dare – that is something entirely different from post-modernism. What we are now beginning to experience at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century 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. Then we became subservient to often self-appointed doyens of fashion and culture for whom merit was found in that which was decontextualized and bizarre.

### **[Hole in the Wall]**

Now, in an age of instantaneous communications that eliminates the effects of geographical distance and time zones, and extends our experience of reality into new dimensions, identity





is oriented by means of “scapes” that juxtapose novel experiences with 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 often abstract, form a new order that is ironically and paradoxically unstable, irregular, and incomplete relative to our historical patterns and exclusively physical experience. This is the new norm to which we are slowly becoming socialized. It is “broken” in a conventional sense, but that is its virtue in the re-formation 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 living this 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 throughout our complex world, and our ability to be appropriately reflexive is the key to the new organization of our lives. It begins with the individual, as Pico Iyer notes: “I think a global soul is somebody who lives in the cracks between cultures, or lives in a world so international that he or she has to devise some scratch answers to the most fundamental questions: what is your home, what is your community, what tradition do you belong to, and even who are you.”

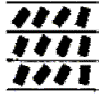
Appropriate reflexivity is the key, as well, to the emergence of global forces that transcend both borders, and traditional political definitions and divisions. The potential power of this emergence poses a tremendous opportunity for those who would adopt Globalism as their personal ethic; and a tremendous challenge to nation-states and corporations – and their leaders – who are still tied to conceptions of reactive internationalism that ironically reinforces nationalistic tendencies, resulting 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? At the McLuhan Program in Toronto, we have embarked on an international project that will help bring the experience of global awareness to ordinary people in an entirely new way. As Marshall McLuhan introduced us to the idea of the Global Village, we wondered how our experience of physical public space might change at the town square.

### **[GVS Concept Art]**

So we have decided to find out, by creating the Global Village Square. Imagine, as if by magic, you could open a portal in a public space like a mall, park, city square, or other natural gathering place that leads instantly to an equivalent space in another city. Now imagine a dozen such portals, connecting pairs of cities throughout the world – cities in one continent to cities in another, affluent cities to cities in emerging countries, cities in the West





to those in the East, and north to south; continually changing pairs of cities, connected in public spaces, available to everyone free of charge, 24 hours a day.

People will approach a portal that contains a large screen onto which a live, real-time image from one of the remote locations is projected. The image will appear life-size; an individual in one place will see his or her counterpart in another part of the world as if the distant person was physically present in the locale — you will be able to look your distant neighbour right in the eye; his or her surroundings would appear to be a natural continuation of the physically local space. Focused microphones and directed speakers will be installed in each portal so that a conversation would be possible between the two locations.

### **[GVS @ Hummingbird]**

A paired connection between two places would be maintained for twenty to thirty minutes. Then, the connection would automatically switch to another city in the network. This ever shifting juxtaposition of previously distant public domains is a new and different kind of space, one that has yet to be experienced — virtual public space. By observing the resultant effects on the people participating, on the physical spaces themselves, on the hosting cities, and on the rest of the world, we will explore the nature of new and different relationships that may be created by this new medium. We hope and expect to see effects never previously observed as people interact with a new perception of space and communications through this new metaphor. Metaphors, by their nature transform one thing into another. In Global Village Square, we will transform public space from a local experience into a global experience, thereby creating new social, cultural and spatial relationships.

The initial connection in Global Village Square will be created between Toronto, Canada and Naples, Italy, early next year. We then plan to add Milan, and have received expressions of interest from groups in Athens, Berlin, Jerusalem, Los Angeles, Paris, Warsaw. By the completion of the first phase of Global Village Square, we plan to have portals in at least two cities on every continent.

We hope that the personal experience of Global Village Square will, in a tangible way, symbolize the connections and relationships that are now driving global political agendas. I'm not talking about the connections and relationships among the rich and powerful political and business leaders through which global politics often is influenced. I'm referring to a new phenomenon that directly demonstrates the effects of Globalism which I mentioned a moment ago. Today, we are experiencing, for perhaps the first time, 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.



**[Face of Peace Protest]**

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 presidential 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 21<sup>st</sup> century, an extreme intensification of the mightiest nation in history that resulted in the reversal of nationalism and nationalistic self-interest into Globalism.

**[Earth in Space]**

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. In other words, 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 local concerns, but the need to re-examine the underlying assumptions of our local concerns 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.