2NRs always go for the 1NRs arguments. The point is, with proper scouting (both before and during a tournament) you should be able to predict with some degree of certainty what the 2NR is likely to do. Similarly, you should attempt to know the predispositions of your judges. Do they like to vote on kritiks, politics disadvantages, or topicality arguments? Or, do they hate topicality debates and theory debates? Knowing their hot button issues in advance is likely to give you a leg up in terms of predicting what you need to do to win the debate.

Sixth, manage prep time. You should save a lot of it and you should use every possible second. This means that the 2NRs prep time is your prep time. This is the time to be starting out in space thinking about your next debate. Instead, you need to be anticipating the negative’s choices and starting to prepare answers. While the 2NR is preparing you should do a few things. Begin by observing what they were doing during the 1AR and what they are doing during their prep time. Are they asking for specific cards? Are they consulting with the 1NR? These sorts of things tend to tip the 2NRs hand. Of course, you need to watch out so as not to get sucked in by purposeful misdirection. Next, begin to circle key arguments. On any given flow there are only so many key arguments—arguments that can either win or lose the debate. You should spend this time identifying those arguments and start getting some of the key warrants for your side in your 2AR column. After identifying key arguments, start modifying your overview. This is the time to take that generic template and start inserting the specifics that apply to this particular debate.

Finally, and most importantly, weigh issues. Jarrod Atchison, a former Wake Forest debater and current coach at the University of Georgia, was easily one of the best 2ARs of the last decade. Jarrod was so successful because he had a litany of stock phrases (some his own, others learned from watching other debaters) to weigh issues from which he could draw as circumstances warranted. Here are some of the phrases that I have heard him remind students of in his lectures about how to be a successful 2AR which you can incorporate into your speeches. There are four basic types of weighing (or comparisons) that can happen in the 2AR (as well as the 2NR). The first involves cost-benefit analysis (magnitude of the impact x the probability of the impact): “Because of the 2NR time allocation, we have a 100% risk of winning the species advantage which has an impact of global extinction. The politics disad has been beaten down with the link and impact answers to a generous offer of a 25% risk of the original disad which only describes a limited war that might kill a couple of million people. It is clear that cost-benefit analysis demands an affirmative ballot.” A second weighing tactic involves evidence comparison. When your offensive argument does not outweigh their offensive argument you need to focus on comparing the competing impacts. For example, “our evidence is more qualified, it comes from...” There evidence on the other hand is from... which is terribly unreliable, because...” Or, “our evidence is more recent and recency matters in this case because...” A third involves impact comparisons. “It would be better to die in the quick and painless wrath of a nuclear war than to die the slow painful death of starvation...” A fourth set of comparisons involve the quality of the debating. For example, “the negative team has barely given this advantage any time.” Or, “the negative hasn’t been able to explain the warrants in their evidence. Don’t read it for them.” Or, my personal favorite is “the negative hasn’t done any impact assessment so give us some extra credibility.” As judges, we usually do, whether the 2AR asks for it or not.

McLuhan and Debate: A Welcoming

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Marshall McLuhan was a thinker who... well, is hard to define. Although he possessed very clear and influential ideas, McLuhan’s place in any one discipline is hard to assess. His work cut across many disciplines, including: anthropology, communication, philosophy, politics, science, and sociology, along with many others. McLuhan can probably most easily be described as a scholar of media studies. When people hear his name, one saying immediately jumps out, “The medium is the message.” McLuhan’s arguments centered on the importance of understanding the various mediums that influenced our lives over the specific content within those media, and, to this day, the work of Marshall McLuhan remains important has influenced many contemporary thinkers. That said McLuhan has managed to remain unrecognized by much of the debate community, even though his ideas seem particularly relevant to the activity. The goal of this article is to welcome Marshall McLuhan to the world of debate. Specifically, there are two goals which this essay will address. First, it aims to give debaters some understanding of the ideas that underscore the significance of McLuhan for the study of communication. Second, the article will attempt to offer possibilities of deployment for those in debate. It is worth noting, however, that this piece makes no claim to be a comprehensive analysis of Marshall McLuhan. Furthermore, I do not seek to say that there are certain ways that McLuhan’s ideas should be used in the world of debate. The idea behind this article is to offer debaters a bit of history about an individual and his ideas, show some degree of applicability, and then turn the reigns over to you, the debater. As you will hopefully see, Marshall McLuhan might have something useful to say for us; we just need to figure out if we have something to say to him.

A History Lesson

There are few ideas of McLuhan’s that section of the essay will seek to develop. I will explore the ideas that the medium is the message, that the medium is the message, and that media are hot or cold. From there, we will look at history as McLuhan sees it, and try to understand why he finds these phenomena to be significant.

The medium is the message. According to Marshall McLuhan, media are extensions of the self via technology. McLuhan says that we use technology, all technology, to extend our senses and intensify or amplify them. For example, clothes are an extension of the skin, glasses are extensions of our eyes, and knives are extensions of our teeth. The purpose of the extensions is to maintain equilibrium with our environment. Eyewear deteriorates and we get glasses as a corrective measure to the new environment that we visually experience. Additionally, these technologies have significant impacts on people by influencing how we think and live. They shape how we think, act, and communicate. What is important in this world to us is based on our understandings and usages of various forms of technology. Using the example of clothes again we can see that clothes allow us to do more because they can provide protection from various weather conditions. Clothes also enable us to change who we are creating possibilities of appearance.

This idea of media as technology is significant because of the ways the mediums influence us independent of their content. The medium is the message. McLuhan states that we get too caught up in the specific content within various mediums and spend all of our time focusing on them in our efforts to find meaning in things. We spend too much energy worrying about the consequences of wearing a shirt
with a particular image on it (let’s imagine a shirt with an advertisement for a type of beer), and not enough time considering how the medium of a shirt with print on it influences us in the first instance. Regardless of what the shirt says, the possibility of saying something makes us a walking billboard by allowing us to express ourselves in lots of ways. While McLuhan doesn’t deny the importance of wearing the beer advertisement, he is particularly concerned with the fact that we generally remain ignorant of the possibility of advertisement that the medium brings.

**The medium is the massage.** A second major idea in McLuhan’s work is that the medium is more than the message; it is also the massage. McLuhan says that historically we have been blind to the effects different media have on us, and he attributes much of that to a numbing effect that the technologies bring onto us. Because technology is an amplification of one or more of the senses the central nervous system responds with “a self-protective numbing of the affected area” designed to make the body unaware of the changes that are being forced on it (McLuhan, 1969, p. online).

McLuhan adds to this by noting that as we develop new media we both numb ourselves to the dramatic changes that are created and we also become enamored with the change. After the initial shock, we become adumbrated with our capacity to produce change. Numbing occurs as a way to provide closure to our world (again, we have equilibrium). McLuhan uses the tale of Narcissus to demonstrate the point:

The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system. (McLuhan, 1964, p. 51)

The final point worth noting here is that we also find ourselves distanced from the extension precisely because it is an extension. McLuhan argues that our bodies are incapable of emotionally understanding the ramifications of the media, and therefore we are capable of de-linking the effects these services provide to ourselves. Citing Konrad Lorenz, Marshall and Eric McLuhan write:

("That if [people] had more weaponry and armour as an organic part of themselves, if, [then] had tusks and horns, [they] would be less likely to kill [their] fellow [people]."

Heavily armed animals have strong inhibitions against their own species. [People], however, have few built-in restraints against turning their artificial weapons (extensions) upon one another. Firearms and bombs, which permit deadly action at great distances, seem to relieve the user of responsibility. (1992, pp. 95-6, gender paraphrased)

**Hot and Cold media.** The third point worth developing before we develop the implications of all of this for McLuhan is that he believes there are "hot" and "cold" media. McLuhan uses these adjectives to describe the levels of definition or precision that a medium gives in terms of the messages it sends. Hot mediums are those that extend one of the senses with a high degree of precision; cool mediums have a lower level of definition associated with them. An example that McLuhan commonly uses to demonstrate the difference is that of a photograph and a cartoon. The photograph is much defined and transmits a lot of "well filled" data, while a cartoon provides a low level of data and a rougher image (McLuhan, 1964, p. 36).

These differing levels of definition are significant for McLuhan because of the ways that they invite the receiver or audience to participate in the construction of meaning. Cool mediums have a much greater level of audience participation because they leave the audience with a greater need, or ability, for completion. A radio, a form of a hot medium, involves a lower level of participation than a television. The radio is extremely defined and is solely oriented towards the sense of hearing. If you turn the volume off, there then is nothing and you have no idea as to what is going on. A television, on the other hand, is not aimed at one particular sense as there are levels of audio and visual involvement. If you are watching the television and turn the sound off, you still have a good opportunity at determining what is going on by relying on your eyesight.

**Implications for McLuhan.** Now that we have briefly covered a few of the major points in McLuhan’s work, we can begin to understand why these concepts possess significance for him. To do this, I will attempt a combination of things: First, I provide a brief outline of history as it relates to McLuhan. For McLuhan, human history has lived through three major transformations. Second, I will explain the significance of these eras for McLuhan, and try to develop the concerns that exist today.

As has already been mentioned, Marshall McLuhan is concerned with the roles of media on our lives, and as such, he views the development of three different media as unlocking the story of humans. He therefore says that we have lived through three technological developments which have transformed human organization and history. These transformations occur with the development of the phonetic alphabet, the printing press, and the telegraph.

The first major development in human history was the development of the phonetic alphabet, or the written word. According to McLuhan, before the phonetic alphabet people lived their lives with a greater balance of all the senses. The only way people had to communicate was through speech which meant that they needed a fuller appreciation of the senses to be able to articulate their thoughts. This reliance on speech meant greater emotional content to what was said, or perhaps more appropriately, how things were said. As will be explained in a minute, McLuhan argues that space in tribal societies was acoustically organized as opposed to visually. Furthermore, to the extent that people communicated through “written,” they did so in ways that were much deeper than that of the word. As he explains:

The writings of Egyptian, Babylonian, Mayan and Chinese cultures were an extension of the senses in that they gave pictorial expression to reality, and they demanded many signs to cover the wide range of data in their societies — unlike phonetic writing, which uses semantically meaningless letters to correspond to semantically meaningless sounds and is able, with only a handful of letters, to encompass all meanings and all languages. (McLuhan, 1969, p. online)

The emergence of the written word did a few things that are significant for McLuhan. First, as should already be becoming obvious, the phonetic alphabet reorganized the importance of the senses and produced a visually-dominated world. The development of written word took sounds that lacked any true meaning, and associated them with visual symbols, letters, that also lacked meaning. The result was a dualism between the eye and the ear, or as McLuhan says, we developed “an eye for an ear” (McLuhan, 1996, p. online).

Second, the move to visual language reorganized time and space by creating the possibility of data storage. McLuhan says that one of the features of tribal society was that, relatively speaking, no one knew more or less than anyone else really did. Since stories, or information, were primarily transmitted through speech, and since all people basically have similar capacities for memory, all members of society basically knew as much as anyone else. The adoption of the phonetic alphabet changed this balance between members of society. The ability to record data allowed for the accumulation of data, the accumulation of knowledge, control.

Third, McLuhan says this split between sight and sound spills over into the social world. Because people realize that they can distinguish, separate, and categorize signs and meanings, they also realize that they can do this in other aspects of their lives. The freedom given by the phonetic alphabet translates into freedom from the family or community. Accelerating the process of individualism, it is the begin-
ning of the end for tribal life:

When [a tribal person] becomes phonetically literate, [they] may have an improved abstract intellectual grasp of the world, but most of the deeply emotional corporate family feeling is excised from [their] relationship with [their] social milieu. This division of sight and sound and meaning causes deep psychological effects, and [they] suffer a corresponding separation and impoverishment of [their] imaginative, emotional and sensory life. [They] begin reasoning in a sequential linear fashion, begins categorizing and classifying data. As knowledge is extended in alphabetic form, it is localized and fragmented into specialties, creating division of function, of social classes, of nations and of knowledge — and in the process, the rich interplay of all the senses that characterized the tribal society is sacrificed. (McLuhan, 1969, p. 71, gender-paraphrased)

Although the written word enabled the destruction of the tribal, McLuhan says that second major transformation, the development of the printing press, brought finitude to it. The printing press allowed the written word to truly take over the world. The word could be reproduced at a rate which was previously unimaginable, and literacy could be extended to all. This served as a stimulus for the church, arts, and the Industrial Revolution. McLuhan also identifies a link between the printing press and nationalism and the nation-state:

The individual newly homogenized by print saw the nation concept as an intense and beguiling image of group destiny and status. With print, the homogeneity of money, markets and transport also became possible for the first time, thus creating economic as well as political unity and triggering all the dynamic centralized energies of contemporary nationalism. By creating a speed of information movement unthinkable before printing, the Gutenberg revolution thus produced a new type of visual centralized national entity that was gradually merged with commercial expansion until Europe was a network of states. By fostering continuity and competition within homogeneous and contiguous territory, nationalism not only forged new nations but sealed the doom of the old corporate, non-competitive and discontinuous medieval order of guilds and family-structured social organization; print demurred both personal fragmentation and social uniformity, the natural expression of which was the nation-state. (McLuhan, 1969, p. online)

While there are additional implications identified by McLuhan, for our purposes the above is sufficient to allow a move to the third major transformation, the telegraph. According to McLuhan, the telegraph precipitated the conversion of the world of Gutenberg to that of Marconi and electronic media. Unlike the alphabet and the printing press, electronic media are causation a fundamental reorganization of space and time. While the alphabet is a hot medium, McLuhan claims that electronic mediums are ushering in a return to the cool. Whereas the written word allowed the amplification of a particular sense, the electronic media amplify all the senses. The electronic media can be understood as being a nervous system, or as McLuhan would say, “a very nervous system” (McLuhan with Fordsale, 1989, p. 12). Electronic media extend people in a host of ways with information coming from all directions.

There are a couple of importance consequences of this reversal articulated by McLuhan. The first is the retinalization of the individual. McLuhan argues that these new electronic media are cool and are increasing the participation of the individual. Whereas the phonetic alphabet meant you read a book and studied in a disassociated manner from the rest of society, the newer electric media require a greater depth of involvement by the individual. This collection of electronic media are re-balancing the senses and de-emphasize the visual in relation to the central nervous system. Additionally, the electric nature of these media, which allows for instantaneous transmission and reception of information, and the capability of global dissemination have meant that it is impossible for a piece of information to truly stand alone. In a discussion on the significance of Spink, in spurring this revolution, McLuhan argues that the achievement of simultaneous information has brought the electric and the preliteracy together:

Paradoxically, [the] electric [person] shares much of the outlook of the preliterate [person], because [they] live in a world in which all data influence other data. Electronic and simultaneous [persons] have rediscovered the primalist attitudes of the preliterate world and have discovered the environment and the ability to have a specialized goal or program merely by inviting competition with other specialized enterprises. (McLuhan, 1989b, p. 71, gender-paraphrased)

McLuhan argues that the significance of this transformation lies not only in the fact that there is a rebalancing of the senses, but also in the fact that these new media are creating a giant network of decentralized tribes that overlap one another. This placement within multiple locations simultaneously is significant in that it has created a situation where one is not sure “where” they belong. By turning the era of specialization upside, the electric media have created a situation where people find themselves facing an identity crisis. This crisis risks the release of bursts of violence:

All our alienation and atomization are reflected in the crumbling of such time-honored social values as the right of privacy and the sanctity of the individual; as they yield to the intensities of the new technology’s electric circus, it seems to the average citizen that the sky is falling in. As [people] are tribally metamorphosed by the electric media, we become Chicken Littles, scurrying around fractured in search of our former identities, and in the process unleash tremendous violence. As the preliteracy confronts the literate in the postliterate arena, as new information patterns inundate and uproot the old, mental breakdowns of varying degrees — including the collective nervous breakdowns of whole societies unable to resolve their crises of identity — will become very common. (McLuhan, 1969, p. online, gender-paraphrased)

Herein lies the significance of the entire project for Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan notes that a common mistake by cultures across time has been the failure to scrutinize, analyze, and understand the nature of the medium. While this failure has been quite detrimental to humankind, breeding things such as nationalism, McLuhan is particularly concerned about the consequences that the electric age could bring. Unlike the ages of the past, this age is unique given the speed that is inherent to the modern mediums. The combination of speed and crisis risk not only violence, but violence on a scale that has never been seen before.

To avoid these most negative outcomes, McLuhan argues that we need to come to understand the medium and wake up to the ways that it can, and does, influence us. McLuhan does not take an antitechnology stand per say, and although he has been mislabeled as a Luddite, McLuhan does not offer his theories as scare tactics. Instead McLuhan argues that he is merely making observations, or probes, into what is, Technology, or the medium, is inevitable. The question is what we do with the situation facing us:

Today, in the electronic age of instantaneous communication, I believe that our survival, and at very least our comfort and happiness, is predicated on understanding the nature of our new environment, because unlike previous environmental changes, the electric media constitute a total and
near-instantaneous transformation of culture, values and attitudes. This upheaval generates great pain and identity loss, which can be ameliorated only through a conscious awareness of its dynamics. If we understand the revolutionary transformations caused by the new media, we can anticipate and control them; but if we continue in our self-induced subliminal trance we will be their slaves. (McLuhan, 1989a, p. 1)

In fact, there is a four question process that McLuhan offers so that we can begin to understand the implications of various media on individuals and society:
1. What aspect of society or life does the medium amplify?
2. What does the new medium eclipse?
3. What aspect does the medium retrieve from obscurity?
4. What does the medium flip or revert into once it has achieved full deployment? (Levinson, 1999)

McLuhan and Debate

The remainder of this essay will attempt to chart some paths of utility regarding the ideas of Marshall McLuhan for the activity of debate. While he is here already in many ways, in others his ideas have been under-developed in the construction of various arguments. As will hopefully be shown there are a host of ways that McLuhan’s work can be useful to the debaters. He presents us with opportunities for whole new arguments, he presents us with pieces to supplement existing arguments, he presents us with ideas about how we should present in the activity. McLuhan helps us understand the importance of being critical about the very nature of this activity, or medium, that we love to play in.

The specific ideas for application will be organized as follows. First, I will attempt to provide some directions to take McLuhan regarding debates about presentation. Second, I will offer a couple ways that McLuhan’s ideas can be utilized in more traditional critique debates. Third, I will offer some ideas for applying McLuhan to traditional policy debate. (Note: I apologize if my differentiations for categories of debate offend some, I merely use these classifications as a way to keep what follows as coherent as possible, at least for me).

The important thing to remember about McLuhan and his work is that McLuhan doesn’t give us one path to follow. McLuhan doesn’t say “X” is good, or “Y” is bad. Some people have taken McLuhan’s work and used it to generate “electronic good” arguments and others have gone the opposite route. Hopefully, this means that there are plenty of ways for debaters to take his work with them. As a final prefatory note, it is also important to realize that what McLuhan says might not “fit” with a lot of our expectations regarding the activity, argument structure, and evidence. If anything, I think this is something Marshall McLuhan would celebrate and encourage you to realize and use.

McLuhan and Presentation. This is probably the most fruitful area of debate in which McLuhan’s theories can be applied. In fact there are examples of McLuhan-esque arguments emerging in contemporary debates that seek to address the nature of the medium in which we seek to play. In this section I will identify several ways to apply to the arguments of McLuhan’s to the activity.

First, and most obvious, McLuhan offers potentially useful criticisms of the reliance on electronic technology in modern debates. It should go without saying that modern high school and intercollegiate debate formats are extremely reliant on the computer and its related technologies. We use these media to conduct research (and for some this is exclusively a computer-based venture any more), we rely on our laptops to “flow” the debates, we have online forums to discuss debate (including its rules and the social dynamics of the debate community), and so on. Perhaps most significantly, we rely on electronic technologies for research-related purposes. These technologies have led to a plethora of arguments during the past several years that would have been virtually unimaginable a mere decade ago. For example, the politics disadvantage has become much more sophisticated as computer-based research has enabled the development of a host of new link arguments and ensures a multiplicity of impact scenarios. Furthermore, internet-based research has pretty much meant that any argument imaginable is feasible given the depth of subjects addressed on the internet. These technologies have even been used by members of the community to author evidence through blogs and public message boards.

These technologies have had several implications on the way the game is played. For instance, the speed with which information can be gathered has made it of utmost importance for squads to be researching 24/7. The explosion of coaching and research staffs employed by programs at tournaments is certainly attributable to this technological phenomenon. Websites such as Planet Debate and CrossX.com, have also blossomed as a result of the research needs schools are faced with today.

Another significant consequence of the reliance on technologies has been the recent utilization of them in presentation. Teams are beginning to explore the use of music and video in rounds as traditional written and oral forms of evidence delivery have been deemed inadequate to express possible lines of argument. In fact, the debate over the legitimacy of these forms of argument is quickly becoming one of the hottest issues facing the community.

It is not the purpose of this essay to take a stance regarding the desirability of any of the above, but merely to suggest that perhaps these are worthy focus points for in-round argumentation. Or, maybe we at least need to think about how these various activities influence the game that we play. McLuhan certainly sets up a viable “tech bad” and “tech good” strategies depending on what wants to impact their arguments and how one envisions the use of these mediums (within the debate medium). As has been previously mentioned, this is the beauty of McLuhan’s work. He does not seek to offer grand theories, but instead probes and explores offering a vast array of links and internal links for us to play with.

There also plenty of uses of McLuhan-esque argument regarding presentational issues facing the activity. Instead of focusing on the use of mediums within the medium, we can also use Marshall’s arguments to focus on how the medium of debate itself operates. For instance, although McLuhan does not offer a direct criticism of the modern debate format, it is quite possible to draw links between his concerns regarding the speed of technology and the speed of delivery in debate. It is quite conceivable that the speed with which debaters speak in very technological. On a related note, the way that debaters “flow” arguments seems to be fertile ground for criticism. Again, I do not seek to praise or condemn, but merely show opportunity for discussion. Is “flowing” listening? How does the prioritization of the visual regarding the flow impact the debater’s equilibrium or balance of senses and so on? What happens when a speed debaters meets the debater who seeks to engage in a “public” style?

Other presentational questions to consider:

Instead of doing research and then bringing the results of that work in our own words, we rely on, almost exclusively, on evidence which is direct quotation of experts. Why? What sort of consequences does this have for how we argue? What sort of consequences does this have for how we learn?

On a related note, on what basis do we justify the use of a brief except from one author, followed by aquip from another and so on? Perhaps we are back to issues of speed. Is this important?

What makes evidence “qualified”? Why don’t we read
For instance, Brad King writes:

As the “war on terror” continues, the lines between military intelligence and surveillance of the civilian population slowly begin to vanish. The more one uses network technology, the more information about themselves they disclose. Willingly or unwillingly, it makes no difference. The mere act of accessing a webpage reveals information about oneself that can be recorded without ones knowledge. In this light, the Internet becomes not a utopian place of resistance, but exactly the opposite. It becomes a network that promotes conformity, an apparatus to ensure social control. McLuhan’s idea of media as prisons without walls seems particularly apt in this instance. (No date, online)

Additionally, McLuhan’s theories seem to create the possibility of arguments about inevitability and alternate causalities that the negative might be able to assemble as a series of solvency attacks. There are probably several other ways to use McLuhan to debate the case which merely need to be explored.

Conclusion

As it should be obvious, the work of Marshall McLuhan and his inquiry into the nature of mediums is a potentially useful tool for debaters. Hopefully at the end of this article you have developed a solid understanding of the basics to McLuhan’s theory. McLuhan tells us that: (1) we have spent too much time analyzing content of any given medium and have ignored analysis of the medium itself, (2) that the most important influences on society come from the media and not the content, that “the medium is the message,” (3) in addition, the medium is also the massage because we are so enamored with the technology that we develop that we become numb to the consequences the medium has for us and society, and (4) that different media have different levels of involvement for their users. These propositions are significant because they tell us that our failure to scrutinize the nature of the media has left us blind to the ramifications that the media unlock and have left us exposed to many harmful developments throughout history. Furthermore, the evolution of the electronic media, with their speed and global reach, makes it imperative that we reverse this trend of unquestioning acceptance or risk an identity crisis and accompanying violence that threatens to rip all that we know apart.

These arguments are extremely relevant to the activity of debate. They are of specific utility given the resolution for the 2005-2006 debate season, but perhaps more importantly, these ideas are useful given the nature of the medium in which we play. For those who sought answers from this essay, I apologize. Although McLuhan offers us tools to use for questioning medium, and although he has given us hints at possible answers, it would be very un-McLuhan for this essay to conclude with “a tech is bad,” or “tech is good,” statement that tells you what is correct or incorrect. Your involvement in the questioning process, your involvement in creating the world that you wish live, or debate in, is exactly what McLuhan seeks. So, that is how I hope this essay has left things. Hopefully it has raised questions regarding the activity. Perhaps it has turned on a light bulb for a particular in-round argument. However, regardless of whether or not McLuhan ever makes it into a debate round, hopefully some of the questions raised by this piece, and/or some of the questions that might have developed on your own, will be considered and influence what direction the activity takes in the future. Therefore, I leave you with the concluding statements from Paul Levinson’s Digital McLuhan:

Do not wait for me or anyone else to tell you.

Read McLuhan, read books and essays about his work, reread this book, and decide for yourself… (1999, p. 203)
Works Cited


Section A: Articles and Topicality, p. A-17

A Sample Argument

A. We need to begin by critiquing the medium, “traditional” critiques overlook this requirement.


“The medium is the message” expresses with perfect economy the idea that how we do something has much to do with the results we obtain, no matter what our original intent may be. This idea is present in Henry David Thoreau’s observation that “we do not ride on the railroad, it rides upon us.” It is there in Mark Twain’s wonderful quip, that when you have a hammer in your hand, everything looks like a nail. It is entirely absent, however, from the slogan of the National Rifle Association, that “guns don’t kill people, people do.” If you believe that guns themselves have increased the potential for violence, then you are with McLuhan. “The medium is the message” implies that we must begin in the middle, with the medium. The medium comes first. Before the sculpture, there is the stone and the chisel. Before the painting, there is the paint and canvas. Before the song, there is the instrument and voice. And consider the process of language acquisition. First, the newborn cries and screams; later, he or she begins to babble. And out of this babble eventually emerges speech. Before meaningful words can be uttered, we must learn how to recognize and produce the sounds of our language. The medium of speech precedes the messages formed through language. Failure to account for this hidden ground is the fatal flaw that runs through much of semiology, structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism.

Activists often express grave concern over the moral effects of the content of television and other media. They are rightly concerned about bad role models and a high incidence of violence and sexual sensuality. They are also legitimately concerned about how influence portrayed on television can make people dissatisfied with their material condition. I recognize these as legitimate concerns, but the primary concern should be on the medium itself. The electronic media have in themselves a narcotic effect on the abuser. In a day when governments and international bodies battle the marketing of chemical substances, no one is mobilized to counteract the negative effects of the electronic media. The electronic media upset normal community and family relations based on physical contact and proximity, leading to an ersatz community where people have the illusion of being angels. People in their relations are reduced to being pieces of disembodied information without context or substance. We do not distinguish between the use of morphia as an aid to inspiration (Edgar Allan Poe), and its use as an escape from intolerable conditions (the user in the American slum). The extensive use of such drugs is dangerous and addictive in both cases. Yet we do not apply the same prudence with regard to the media.

C. Addiction to technology risks violence and human survival (see the McLuhan excerpts quoted above).

D. The _______ is addicted/provides evidence of addiction by the debate community (I don’t know if there is “evidence” for this, this requires explanation and your own development)

E. We need to break from our tech dependence and “fast”


We may draw some practical conclusions. First, it is necessary to become aware of the effects of media upon our cognitive relation to reality, and its effect upon our appetites. Second, we should recognize that technology is a good thing in itself, as it is part of God’s command to man that he subdue the earth, but we should recognize that if we rely on technology to solve all human problems, we are becoming idolaters. Idolatry puts man at a lower level than the idol, and the result is personal and social disorder. Third, the right use of technology means that we should also counteract its attractions. Communications technology concerns man’s most basic appetite, the appetite to realize one’s self through knowledge. However, the mere quantity of information may distract us from knowledge which is of true value. The most dangerous attitude is that of one who sits in front of the television set or computer terminal without a critical attitude. Since the machine is on, he takes up a passive and receptive stance. The Christian practices of fasting and abstinence are perhaps easy compared with consciously limiting of our use of the media, yet that is required for mental and moral health.

Answers

1. The medium is not the whole message


DA: McLuhan is famous for the idea that “the medium is the message.” You note that the medium today is never the whole message. Can you explain that?

FZ: Until McLuhan came along to alert us to the deep effects of the medium in shaping the message, we were taught to take the message, the content alone, as whole. The difference between reality and its record as history was not a disparity that bothered us much. McLuhan showed us how the historical view is no longer possible. History has simply devolved to
2. Presuming the “evil” of the electronic media recreates the dichotomies that the critique seeks to eliminate


It is curious that Baudrillard, interpreted by many of his followers as an avant-garde, postmodern media theorist, manifests in this passage both technophobia and a nostalgia for face-to-face conversation which he privileges (as authentic communication) over debased and abstract media communication. Such a position creates a binary dichotomy between “good” face-to-face communication and “bad” media communication, and thus occludes the fact that interpersonal communication can be just as manipulative, distorted, reified, and so on, as media communication (as Ionesco and Habermas, among others, were aware), while ruling out in advance the possibility of “responsible” or “emancipatory” media communication — a point that I shall return to in conclusion.

3. Content analysis is more important


First, in what might be called a formalist subordination, Baudrillard, like McLuhan, privileges the form of media technology over what might be called the media apparatus, and thus subordinates content, meaning, and the use of media to its purely formal structure and effects. Baudrillard — much more so than McLuhan who at least gives some media history and analysis of the media environment — tends to abstract media form and effects from the media environment and thus erases political economy, media production, and media environment (i.e., society as large) from his theory. Against abstracting media form and effects from context, I would argue that the use and effects of media should be carefully examined and evaluated in terms of specific contexts. Distinctions between context and use, form and content, media and reality, all dissolve, however, in Baudrillard’s one-dimensional theory where global theses and glib pronouncements replace careful analysis and critique. Baudrillard might retort that it is the media themselves which abstract from the concreteness of everyday social, political life and provide abstract simulacra of actual events which themselves become more real than “the real” which they supposedly represent. Yet even if this is so, media analysis should attempt to contextualize media images and simulacra rather than merely focusing on the surface of media form. Furthermore, instead of operating with a model of (formal) media effects, I would argue that it is preferable to operate with a dialectical perspective which posits multiple roles and functions to television and other media.

4. Rejecting technology leads to the Khmer Rouge


If by nature we mean the merely material order, the order of things that act without intellect or volition, man cannot return to a state of nature because he was never in that state. Jean Jacques Rousseau was influential in spreading the idea of the “noble savage”, as if man could exist in a condition where it was not necessary to form organized societies, or where man did not use tools of his own making to transform and exploit the natural world. The massacre of vast populations in Cambodia in the Khmer Rouge’s “Year Zero” perhaps best exemplifies Rousseau’s reasoning followed to its logical conclusion.[5] The Khmer Rouge believed that literacy and Western Civilization corrupted man, and that a happy society could only be achieved by erasing all the effects of civilization.

5. Alternative media solve


Against this snide and glib put-down of alternative media, I would argue that alternative television-radio-film provide the possibility of another type of media with different forms, content, goals, and effects from mainstream media.[15] A radical media project would thus attempt to transform both the form and the content of the media, as well as their organization and social functions. In a socialist society, mass media would be part of a communal public sphere and alternative media would be made accessible to all groups and individuals who wished to participate in media communication. This would presuppose a dramatic expansion of media access and thus of media systems which would require more channels, technology, and a social commitment to democratic communication. To preserve its autonomy, such systems should be state funded but not controlled — much like television in several European countries.[16] It would also have to function as the better local public access systems now do in the United States in which a certain number of channels are put aside for public use and available to everyone on a non-discriminatory basis. In Austin, Texas, for instance, we now have a multi-channel access system with two channels reserved for city government, one city educational channel for use by the Austin school system, one for regularly scheduled weekly access shows by groups committed to public access television, and two channels open to anyone for any use whatsoever (these two channels are currently dominated by religious, musical, and sports programming). So far this system has proved functional, allowing just about any individual or group the opportunity to make and broadcast their own programming and statements. An alternative media system would thus provide the possibility for oppositional, counterhegemonic subcultures and groups to produce programs expressing their own views, oppositions, and struggles that resist the massification, homogenization, and passivity that Baudrillard and others attribute to the media. Alternative media allow marginal and oppositional voices to contest the view of the world, values, and life-styles of the mainstream, and make possible the circulation and growth of alternative subcultures and communities. Baudrillard’s theoricism, however, completely eschews cultural practice and becomes more and more divorced from the political struggles and issues of the day — though the question of Baudrillard’s politics would take another long and very tortured paper to deal with.