

Essential McLuhan

by: Marilyn Hawkins

"Herbert Marshall McLuhan was born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, on July 21, 1911 and died in 1980. He became internationally famous during the 1960's and 1970's for his studies of the effects of mass media on thought and social behavior." McLuhan studied at the University of Manitoba and received his Ph.D. at Cambridge in England in 1943. He was an extremely learned man and an extremely religious one. His father was a life insurance salesman and his mother was an actress. She was a much more driving force in his life. She was known to be a great speaker and McLuhan much preferred speaking to writing. He seemed to be an enemy of print and literacy to some people and a futuristic to many others.

From the beginning, man had only the spoken word to communicate with each other. The first printing press with moveable type in history produced the Gutenberg Bible in 1450. This was the first printed book in history, because before this time books were written on scrolls and by hand. In McLuhan's writings in, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, he stated that, "print was the technology of individualism." This phrase meant that men would be changing the way they learn from story telling to the reading of print and books.

Later in history during the 1600's, the Phoenician alphabet was developed and still remains the early form of the alphabet that we use today. The translation of the bible by Martin Luther in the 1600's was also a major turn in history. This development allowed the common man to be able to read the written word. McLuhan believed that the development of the alphabet and the ability to print caused a major change in the mental

processes of the way people learn. He referred to this change as the development of "media."

McLuhan wanted people to understand that media differed between hot and cold. Hot media in his view was like the television program or news that we sit and watch and learn from. We do not interact with it except maybe to have conversation with a family member about that which is being viewed. Cold media, however, is media in which we watch and have interaction. For example, the playstation games that are available today. We can watch the game on television and using a joystick or some kind of peripheral device can interact with the game. McLuhan thought that to understand the revolutionary transformations caused by the new media on people's minds would allow these people to control the effect that the media had on their minds. He described the process of not understanding and becoming absorbed into the new media as entering a "zombie trance."

Could the computer today be changing the way people think and learn? The computer generation came after McLuhan's time. However, McLuhan spoke and explained how "extensions" have developed to help man do things with his body that he couldn't do before. For example, he said that clothes are extensions of man's biological temperature control mechanisms. Furniture took the place of when man used to squat or sit on the ground. Glasses were an extension of the eyes, and telephones were an extension of man's voice. Thus, the computer today is the extension of man's mind or brain. The students of today have become accustomed to this cold media of the computer. Computer games, the Internet, the ability to read and click and copy and paste has indeed changed to way our minds process information.

Today we can say that the computer as a human extension of the mind has transcended the world. Communications between countries and the people of those countries has broken down barriers such as we faced in the "Cold War." There is no more iron curtain separating the free world and the communist world. Before the computer, of course, the media extension was the television and the telephone. Because of satellites people can receive communications from all over the world. Information and knowledge is no longer just the time and space in which we live, but has transformed us into a global society. The Internet is a tool now by which the world communicates.

What about our schools of today? And what about our children? McLuhan believed that our education system is not able to educate our children who are so accustomed to the cool media of their world. He stated that if we don't adapt our linear educational system to the student's needs and values, that we will see many more dropouts and much more chaos. He said the TV child finds it difficult to adjust to the lack of visuals of our educational system. We as educators must try to involve all of the student's senses as the TV and computer medium do.

It has just been in the last five years that the job performance goals that we sign and agree to use as our own in the classroom have now involved a technology agent. The school system with its lack of funding and vision has struggled with putting technology into the classroom over the last few years. Many teachers don't have the vision to use the Internet as a teaching tool. In so many ways our students of today have surpassed us in their knowledge of technology. The new digital generation of media is transforming the way they think and work. Our libraries are a true example of how McLuhan's statement is true that the "medium is the message." We can now read books on the Internet. We

can get immediate answers to questions by looking them up on the Internet. High School English classes are being transformed by the ability to do instant research. Research papers can be downloaded and copied. Teachers have to be more diligent to the student's ability to plagiarize.

The trend in high school education today is moving more toward industry certifications as an addition to the high school diploma. Learning software packages such as Microsoft Office Word and the computing certification of IC3 has come on the scene. Others are A++ and Cisco. The need for the skilled workers entering the workplace are so much higher now as compared to the high school graduates of the 1950's. Education is going to change because of the information age.

McLuhan saw the electric form of the information revolution to be the drive to change the way people thought and learned. He was, indeed, a man in touch with the changes in the world long before the changes happened.