

Gigi Taylor Book Review

Marshall McLuhan's "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man"

Introduction to the book

Written in 1964, "Understanding Media" catapulted McLuhan to the top of 1960s intellectual pop culture world. In the introduction to the 1994 reprint of the book, Lewis Lapham reflects that McLuhan joined the likes of Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Woody Allen. Colorfully placing McLuhan with the rest of '60s, Lapham writes that McLuhan's run was short lived, "Informed opinion had moved on to other things and McLuhan's name and reputation were sent to the attic with the rest of the sensibilities (go-go boots, Sgt. Pepper, Woodstock, and the Vietnam War) that embodies the failed hopes of a discredited decade."

So what is "Understanding Media" about? What did McLuhan write that earned him the title of an "academic rebel" "populist sage" and even "cracker barrel Socrates"? Why did Woody Allen give Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian English professor, a cameo appearance in the movie, "Annie Hall"?

Quite simply, McLuhan wrote a book about media theory, the type of text that would be found on a syllabus in a graduate level mass communications readings course. In this book report, I will attempt to explain why this erudite analysis of media created such a firestorm and remains an enigma.

Description of the author

McLuhan taught English at the University of Toronto. He wrote "Understanding" in 1964 at the age of 52. Donald Fishman, media theorist at Boston College, writes that while McLuhan might have been perceived as an academic outsider, McLuhan actually had a very conventional educational pedigree: BA from University of Manitoba followed by MA and PhD in English from Cambridge. Lapham gives a visual of McLuhan as a "rumpled professor, gaunt and kindly figure, disorganized, absent-minded and quixotically dressed." Indeed, McLuhan was an intellectual cognoscente from the humanities branch of the academy.

Evaluation of the author's qualifications to write this book

As an American educated mass media practitioner and theorist, I believe McLuhan was an outsider. McLuhan wrote about media theory without any regarding to existing mass communication theory. He made no reference to the long tradition of "effects" research that is the very backbone of mass communication research. Mass communication researchers returned the favor by not including McLuhan in few if not any mass communication theory books. For example, McQuail's classic "Mass Communication Theory" textbook, which is now in its 6th edition, makes no references to McLuhan. As a graduate student, I never studied McLuhan. Simply put, McLuhan is not considered a credible mass communication theorist.

Yet, after a close read of McLuhan, I now argue that it was McLuhan's outsider status that gave him the platform to critically offer a new perspective on media theory.

McLuhan's academic training was not in mass communication. McLuhan did not teach in a mass communication department. McLuhan gained inspiration from the outside, the same vantage point that other rebels from the 1960s used to gather strength.

Evaluation of author's theories and style of writing

In the introduction to "Understanding Media," McLuhan reported that one of the editors of his book was dismayed that "seventy-five percent of the your material is new. A successful book cannot venture to be more than ten percent new." The new material that McLuhan's editors were worried about came from McLuhan application of linguistics, cultural studies, philosophy, design, and anthropology to media.

McLuhan was part of the media ecology movement that embraced the idea of technical determinism. According to Wikipedia, technical determinism is "a reductionist theory that presumes that a society's technology drives the development of social structure and cultural values." McLuhan was simply and powerfully linking media with technology, back in 1964 when network TV was the most advanced form of media technology.

While McLuhan may have made significant theoretical contributions to media and social science theory, his contributions were made in spite of his writing. McLuhan's writing style is painfully dense and opaque. Reading McLuhan was like listening to experimental jazz: I felt I should enjoy it, but the rhythms and melodies were simply too complex for my ear to appreciate.

Contributions of McLuhan

Lapham wrote that McLuhan was a "dealer in communication theory." A dealer he was, but not necessarily in communication theory. McLuhan went outside the discipline to make contributions to media theory.

Postmodernism. One of the ideas of postmodernism philosophy is that "image is everything" and "power of symbol over substance." The likes Baudrillard, Derrida, Lyotard were well into theorizing the idea of style over substance when McLuhan simply applied the idea to media. It is not so much the message, but WHERE and HOW the message is placed that is the real meaning.

Social linguists. James W. Carey, a communication theorist at Columbia University noted in his book, "Contemporary rhetoric" that McLuhan applied the socio-linguistic Sapir-Wharf theory to mass media. According to Wikipedia, the Sapir-Wharf theory suggests, "the structure of language determines thought and behavior." As an extension, the STRUCTURE of the message (the medium) determines thought. Example: a 30 second spot placed on network TV during the Super Bowl sends a powerful message that this brand is "big." The actual creative strategy of the ad is secondary.

Design. Louis Sullivan, the famous modernist architect of the 20th century is associated with “Form follows function.” The idea of this statement is that the shape of objects should be first based on the purpose or function of the object. McLuhan brilliantly extended this design principle and suggested that “content of communication is followed by form.” This means that the form (how the media looks like...radio, TV, digital) drives the meaning content. As McLuhan writes, “the content of communication is dictated by form.”

Symbolic anthropology. McLuhan introduced the idea of “meaning” into media theory. Moving beyond “effects,” McLuhan was following the same line of thought as Clifford Geertz and others from symbolic anthropology. For McLuhan, it was all about meaning, context, and mediation, terms borrowed (or repurposed) directly from classic anthropology.

Impact of technology on theory. As a technological determinist, McLuhan avoided mass communication’s historical straightjacket of quantitative methods and the accompanying “effects” theory. Instead, McLuhan wrote, “insurgent technologies give rise to new structures of feeling and thought.” McLuhan understood that new technology drives the need for new theories and methods; new ways of understanding our world.

Recommendation

Mark Twain once wrote, “ ‘Classic.’ A book which people praise and don’t read.” Following Twain’s classification system, I would place anything written by McLuhan as a classic. Don’t read McLuhan. Instead find other writers who can interpret, illuminate and provide context for this brilliant thinker.

Better yet, check out “Annie Hall” via Netflix and watch for McLuhan’s cameo. Wink back at McLuhan via Woody Allan in the acknowledgement that you understand that the medium (on demand movie via a handheld smart phone) is (still and always will be) message.