

## **Morphing McLuhan: Medium Theory for a New Millennium**

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I am honored to have been invited to give this keynote address at the second Annual Media Ecology Convention. I want to express my great admiration for Lance Strate and Janet Sternberg and all the others who made this event possible.

Marshall McLuhan is incredible. Harold Adams Innis is great. Eric Havelock is wonderful. Walter Ong is amazing. May their spirits be sanctified! Amen. Thank you. Please carry on with the conference! [*Speaker starts to leave podium, then returns.*] Well, actually, I have a bit more to say.

Friends, media ecologists, countrymen, I come to help unbury McLuhan *and* to praise him. But I also want to wrestle with his legacy and add encouragement for moving beyond McLuhan—partly with his help. I'd like to see McLuhan become, in his own terminology, more “obsolescent” (that is, not obsolete, not abandoned, not disparaged, yet less central to media ecology, in the way that McLuhan saw the book as becoming less central to Western culture). And just as McLuhan had mixed feelings about the displacement of books, to which he was so attached both by training and personal inclination, I have mixed feelings about displacing and re-situating McLuhan. I know rationally that we need to move forward with this displacement for the health of the field. Emotionally, however, I feel bound up with McLuhan as I might with a father: hesitant to mention his shortcomings, uncomfortable about unseating him from the head of the table, yet knowing that we, his intellectual heirs, will be failures if we don't build on his accomplishments while also moving beyond him. This ambivalence will be *apparent* in my comments (McLuhanesque pun intended).

I first read and became enthralled with Marshall McLuhan when Gary Gumpert assigned *Understanding Media* (1964/1994) to his Introduction to Mass Communication class at Queens College when I was a student there 32 years ago. And these are certainly heady times for those of us who have been fans and followers of McLuhan for many decades.

After seeing McLuhan's concepts and aphorisms ridiculed, after hunting in bookstores for used copies of his books that had gone out of print (and enduring bookstore clerks' queries of, “How do you spell MacCloohane?”), after seeing McLuhan's name disappear from the indexes of mass communication textbooks and scholarly works, after being criticized by colleagues and

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anonymous peer reviewers for citing him or attempting to extend his work, it's certainly a great thrill to welcome McLuhan back into the popular and academic arenas.

When *Wired* magazine was founded in 1993, McLuhan was named as its "patron saint." McLuhan's books are in print again and appear on various bestseller lists online. Type his name in an Internet search engine (itself a McLuhanesque gauge of fame), and you'll find more hits than for 50 or 100 typical scholars combined.

McLuhan is being treated seriously again in academic circles. Or rather than "again," perhaps it's more accurate to say that he is being treated seriously for the first time. This new respect is true even in those academic fields that have been most negative about McLuhan, such as cultural studies. The 2001 volume on key works in *Media and Cultural Studies*, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner, includes McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message" chapter from *Understanding Media*. As the editors explain, "McLuhan was a prophet of both the media and computer age, noting . . . how more and more forms of culture and consciousness are being rendered into 'the form of information'" (pp. 112–113). Another cultural studies scholar, Nick Stevenson (1995), has argued recently that if one defocuses a bit on McLuhan's overly deterministic constructions of his arguments for media impact, "his writing remains full of insight" (p. 127).

The wider acceptance of McLuhan is a sign of redemption for many of us who have been his long-term admirers and advocates. And yet, the more that McLuhan is now embraced by other academics and the larger culture, the more important it is for us, as media ecologists, to move beyond him so that our field is not limited by and to him. And I applaud the efforts that many of you are making to do that.

At the same time, I have to admit that it is very tempting to gloat about McLuhan's resurrection. And what's the point of being a stodgy academic if one can't yield to temptations from time to time, or at least analyze them? The first part of my talk, therefore, is called "Temptations." I'll describe a few reasons why it's enticing for us to revel in McLuhan's salvation, even as such celebrations may distract us from moving forward with the field.

The second part of my talk is called "Difficulties." There, I'll describe another set of challenges to our progress: how McLuhan's texts, or anti-texts as I prefer to call them, are so idiosyncratic that they are difficult to build on or extend in the way one can with most other seminal scholarly works. Finally, I'll briefly outline some "Possibilities" for morphing McLuhan into new medium theory by identifying one of his own techniques that points to a way both to emulate him and to surpass him. So my talk has three parts: "Temptations" to dwell on McLuhan, "Difficulties" in building on his work, and "Possibilities" of moving beyond McLuhan by drawing on one aspect of his implicit "method." I will give four examples of each.

#### Four Temptations to Remain Focused on McLuhan

**T**EMPTATION One: He was right. Perhaps the biggest temptation to dwell on McLuhan is that McLuhan was correct about so many things that others at the time were not able to perceive or understand. More clearly than most other social observers, McLuhan was able to see past the surface content of television and radio programs, films, and books in order to analyze the nature of each underlying medium, what was special about it, and how it was differ-

ent from other media. While others focused on concerns of imitation and persuasion and on counting acts of violence, sexuality, or sexism, McLuhan (1964/1994), in his most famous pun, attacked this focus on messages by declaring “The *medium* is the message” (p. 7, emphasis added). By this he meant that each medium is a unique type of environment whose widespread use reshapes people and culture. I’ve called this approach “*medium* theory”—following McLuhan in the singular “medium” as the key “message”—rather than *media* ecology or *media* theory in general, because medium theory focuses on the unusual characteristics that distinguish one medium, or one *type* of media, from other media (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 16; 1994b).

Even more impressively, McLuhan was able to see past the specifics of radio and television to some underlying characteristics that set electronic media (what he called electric media) apart from print media. Where others saw general continuity (or simply cultural decline), he saw fundamental difference and transformation.

As Paul Levinson (1999) has documented in impressive detail in his book *Digital McLuhan*, McLuhan’s theories are even a better match for the current digital age than they were for the communication technologies that existed when McLuhan was writing. Indeed, McLuhan spoke about the “global village” long before there was even a CNN, let alone a World Wide Web. When McLuhan wrote about electric media making all of us present to each other across the globe, he did a rather good job of describing a world of email and instant messaging that was beyond the imagination of most of his contemporaries.

As even critics of McLuhan would now have to acknowledge, his *Understanding Media* gave us the current conceptions about and awareness of “media” and the “information age.” It’s difficult to believe today, yet when McLuhan wrote his earliest draft of *Understanding Media* in 1959 (as a high school media curriculum for the U.S.’s National Association of Educational Broadcasters), a generally enthusiastic reviewer cautioned that the term “media” was not in the average teacher’s vocabulary and would need to be explained clearly (Gordon, 1997, p. 181). Similarly, some early critics of McLuhan put the word “media” in quotes to distance themselves from what they saw as McLuhan’s odd usage (see, for example, Burke, 1968; Roszak, 1968; Wagner, 1968).

Of course, McLuhan was wrong in some of his predictions. His claims that the end was in sight for baseball, cities, and the automobile seem pretty far off the mark. But he was *usually* right. In *Understanding Media* (1964/1994) McLuhan correctly saw that advances in technologies would lead executives to do work once done by servants and secretaries (p. 36), that it was becoming impossible to isolate minorities and youth from the larger culture (p. 5), that the boundaries between disciplines would begin to disappear with a focus on the “interrelation in knowledge” (p. 35), that computers would allow rapid translation from one language to another (p. 80), and that there would be an unprecedented sense of “involvement” across old boundaries within and across nations (discussed throughout his work).

One reason for the general reassessment of McLuhan among critical theorists and others concerned with issues of political power may be that the fear of top-down control over information and thought is not as good a fit for the era of the personal computer, Internet, camcorder, mobile phone, and other new technologies as it was—and still is—for newspapers, radio, and television. Indeed, these new technologies have been used, by sizable minorities at least, to organize resistance to dominant corporate and government power, thereby offering supporting examples of

McLuhan's notions of electronic media encouraging participation, decentralization, and a flattening of hierarchies.

Yet, perhaps more than any particular prediction, McLuhan's work in all its dimensions—clear and foggy, predictively accurate or misguided—called for us to pay attention to the ways in which the communication technologies and other tools we shape also work to reshape us.

McLuhan's work stands out as authoritative less on his analysis of particular changes than on his focus on second-order change, that is, his call for us to look at changes in the nature of change: change in the rate of change, change in the type of change, change in the criteria used to judge change, change in the narratives used to describe change. Now that we've watched so many of these changes in change take place, it's easy and tempting to stand in awe of him.

**Temptation Two: McLuhan's texts are fun to explore and unravel.** McLuhan's writing style is elliptical, rather than linear; he runs from the beginning of one argument to the middle or end of another argument, only to return later to finish (partly) the first argument. This is, of course, one of the Difficulties of building on his work. Yet, this style also makes his work very engaging (or, as McLuhan would say, very "cool" and "participatory").

The first sentence of the first chapter of *Understanding Media*, for example, begins as follows: "In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control..." (1964/1994, p. 7). Someone familiar with McLuhan's media philosophy might logically expect that this opening premise would be followed by a claim about electronic media unifying once-split phenomena. Instead, McLuhan concludes the sentence with "it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message." Thus, even this first sentence presents a kind of puzzle by juxtaposing seemingly unrelated claims.

In the next sentence, McLuhan explains that the consequences of any new technology result "from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs" (thereby giving one definition of how a medium can be a "message"). In the next few sentences, McLuhan presents the example of automation, which "eliminates jobs" but "creates roles." Yet, one must read further into the book to find clues to McLuhan's definition of the word "job" as fragmented and superficial work (thus linking back to the "splitting and dividing" phrase found in the chapter's first sentence) and to his use of the term "role" to mean integrated and deep, which sets the stage for his argument about the effects of electronic media. But before he further develops his argument about what are normally considered media of communication—and long before he explicitly links "automation" to electronic media or explains how he views the assembly line as one of the many types of linear forms connected to the mechanical print era—McLuhan digresses for a few paragraphs to discuss how the "electric light is pure information" and how the "'content' of any medium is always another medium" (p. 8).

Any reader hoping to discern a linear argument in *Understanding Media* has to bring his or her own pencil and ruler and attempt to redraw the ideas of the text into straight lines of reasoning. Even the reader who can't be bothered with wrestling with the text, however, is rewarded with a rich array of pithy sayings, prophetic pronouncements, and playful puns. Samples of these can be found online at many worshipful web sites.

In short, McLuhan's writing is so dense and rich that it seems to cry out for participatory exegesis and for treatment as holy text. Setting it aside feels almost sacrilegious.

**Temptation Three: McLuhan is so deliciously derisive.** As scholars, we are typically taught to couch our criticisms in polite and qualified language. ("Professor Smith's work is very provocative; however, she pays very little attention to X.") McLuhan would have none of that sort of tiptoeing around criticism. In assessing Wilbur Schramm's *Television in the Lives of Our Children*, for example, McLuhan writes that since Schramm focused on TV content, "he had *nothing* to report" (1964/1994, p. 19, emphasis added). McLuhan likened content researchers (like Schramm) to the easily fooled family watchdog who is distracted from what's really happening in the situation by focusing on the content of the raw meat brought in by a burglar. Just in case those criticisms were not sufficiently clear, McLuhan also noted, "The conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot" (p. 18).

To be entertained by devastating critiques such as these, scholars usually have to put down their academic books and journals and tune in to comedians such as Chris Rock or George Carlin. With McLuhan, however, we can simply keep reading.

**Temptation Four: The low quality of much criticism.** It is also tempting to gloat about McLuhan's resurrection because so many of his early critics were zanily off-base in their attacks. Jonathan Miller (1971), for example—a normally brilliant physician, writer, performer, and director—made some preposterous demands of McLuhan's frameworks before he would entertain them. In attacking McLuhan's notion that the spread of phonetic writing and reading altered the prior ratio of the senses, Miller wrote that when McLuhan "refers to the 'natural ratio' that prevails between the five senses he makes no effort to specify the units it comprises, and unless such a specification can be made the notion of 'ratio' has no meaning" (p. 86). As Miller continues with arguments about how a "spot of light can be immediately defined by giving the number of foot-candles in the incident source, or by reading off the figures on the scale of a galvanometer which has been inserted into the electric current that activates the light" (p. 86), he tempts the reader to think that he is writing a parody of academic debate for Monty Python, or for his own comedy group "Beyond the Fringe" (which, along with Miller, featured Peter Cook and Dudley Moore). But he is apparently deadly serious.

In reviewing the early criticisms of McLuhan against what McLuhan actually said and wrote, one can see that many of the critics simply misstated what McLuhan was arguing and then dismissed their own versions of his observations. When McLuhan argued that print was "obsolescent," for example, many critics countered that McLuhan was crazy to think that print would disappear. Yet, McLuhan's argument was that the *cultural patterns* he attributed to print culture (such as one-thing-at-a-time, one-thing-after-another thinking and experience) would diminish in significance in the face of patterns fostered by electronic media. He freely acknowledged that more books were being printed than ever before (1964/1994, p. 82), and he clearly hoped to add to those numbers with his own works. McLuhan's actual argument about print culture was lost on Lewis Mumford (1970), who described McLuhan as being worse for books than the Nazis had been. The Nazis' burning of books in bonfires, Mumford argued, was a "relatively innocent

manifestation” since it “disposed of only a token number of the world’s store of books.” McLuhan, in contrast, embraced and promoted “total illiteracy, with no permanent record except that officially committed to the computer, and open only to those permitted access to this facility” (p. 294).

Similarly, Sidney Finkelstein (1968, p. 36) argued that McLuhan was wrong when he claimed that writing gave tribal peoples “an eye for an ear,” because literate people continued to speak and listen. (An equivalent critique would be to argue that the field of sociology was based on a false premise about the impact of industrialization because people continued to grow food and make products by hand.)

Finkelstein also missed McLuhan’s point about the *form* of an older medium becoming the content of a new medium, as when the narrative form of the printed novel is adopted by the newer motion picture. Taking a strictly content view, Finkelstein argued that McLuhan was wrong because although some novels are made into movies, others are not, and the best movies are those that have original content (pp. 42–43).

When McLuhan said that schools had to change their teaching styles to adjust to the electronic era, critics argued that McLuhan foolishly wanted to replace teachers with TV sets (see, for example, Gambino, 1972). Yet McLuhan never made such an argument. Indeed, he called for a much more involved, participatory, and individualized form of learning that included critical analysis of the new media environment—an approach that most teachers today would recognize as a form of “cooperative learning” (Meyrowitz, 1996).

Even McLuhan’s most famous aphorism, “The Medium is the Message,” confused many conventional scholars. Noted communication scholar Wilbur Schramm, for example, said this claim made no logical sense, since, clearly, the message is the message and the medium is the medium. To demonstrate what he saw as the inanity of McLuhan’s claim, Schramm (1973, p. 128) offered the example that American citizens reacted with similar horror to the news of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, regardless of whether they heard the message in conversation, over the radio, on TV, or in a newspaper.

Schramm’s example, however, missed the McLuhanesque point that the mourning for JFK was so powerful because of the pre-existing *TV-induced* intimacy with JFK and his family. This intimacy began in the famous debates with Richard Nixon, where the same content was perceived quite differently by those who heard the debates on radio (where Nixon *sounded* more authoritative) and those who watched them on TV (where Kennedy *looked* much more appealing). The TV medium was clearly a major part of the “JFK message.” Schramm seemed to win the argument in his day; but a McLuhanite might gloat over the fact that Wilbur Schramm now has only a small fraction of the google.com hits that Marshall McLuhan has—an unfair standard, perhaps, yet the new medium clearly heralds McLuhan’s message.

Some critics of McLuhan simply invented out of whole cloth what they saw as “McLuhanism” and then dismissed it. James Morrow (1980), for example, made the absurd assertion that “McLuhanism contends that as kids glue themselves to their TV sets they absorb subliminally a full working knowledge of film grammar” and therefore, if McLuhan were correct, these children should be able to make excellent movies (p. 2). But McLuhan never makes this claim. And although knowledge of film production variables is not the same as media “content,” it is quite distinct from what McLuhan analyzes as a medium’s environment (Meyrowitz, 1998). To

say that youth resonate with the environment fostered by a new medium they have experienced since birth is not to say that they are professional producers within that medium.

More recently, the ad copy for the book *The Sound Bite Society* by Jeffrey Scheuer (1999) says, “McLuhan was wrong: the medium *slants* the message”—thus McLuhan’s basic argument is restated as if it disproves his view. (The book itself mentions McLuhan only in passing.)

These are just a few of the scores of similar examples of misrepresentations of McLuhan’s theories. (Some critics even reverse McLuhan’s arguments about hot and cool media, saying McLuhan called TV a hot medium.) Thus, it’s very tempting to rally around McLuhan and his insights in the face of these kinds of distortions and misunderstandings of his arguments.

In defense of those who garble McLuhan’s frameworks, however, we have to admit that McLuhan did not make it easy for others to grasp his ideas or build on his work. This leads us to considering difficulties with McLuhan’s material.

#### Four Difficulties in Building on McLuhan

**D**IFFICULTY One: **McLuhan’s style of argument worked against making converts to his way of thinking.** As is clear from what I have described already, McLuhan usually did not do the work necessary to *persuade* readers. Generally, he simply *declared* his view, while often belittling other perspectives.

**Difficulty Two: McLuhan’s work lacks traditional scholarly structures.** Even his two best and most “bookish” books, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964/1994), have no indexes and only skeletal tables of contents. There are no citation footnotes. Although *Understanding Media* is divided into chapters (unlike *The Gutenberg Galaxy*), the chapters do not clearly build on each other into some larger ideational structure or conclusion. Numerous passages in his books read more like transcripts of extemporaneous speaking than traditional scholarly texts. (And, indeed, McLuhan did “write” many of his works via dictation.)

**Difficulty Three: McLuhan’s lack of traditional scholarly terminology.** McLuhan rarely followed the traditional scholarly strategy of stripping words of their multiple meanings and precisely defining a term to mean one specific thing. Instead, he attempted to use the textured oral language of puns and poetry—where words intentionally have more than one meaning—to make the arguments of science.

McLuhan typically did not create new terminology that described what he was observing and arguing. Instead, he drew on familiar words (jobs vs. roles, hot vs. cool, open vs. closed, exploding vs. imploding, visual vs. tactile, etc.), but he stretched their meanings to apply to his unfamiliar notions. And he rarely explicitly described *how* he was using his terms. When McLuhan argued that print was “visual” and “alienating” and that TV was “tactile” and “participatory,” for example, he faced the uphill challenge of working against the commonsense view that TV is a visual medium that one watches passively from a distance, while one holds and touches a book whose content stimulates one’s active involvement and imagination. McLuhan, it seemed, had it backwards. Such descriptions probably distanced, and lost, most of his readers at the start.

One has to know McLuhan's work very well to abandon these common meanings of the terms and common views of the experience of media. To grasp McLuhan's points about TV versus print, for example, one has to understand a largely unstated explanatory principle: that a medium can stimulate a sense that is absent in the medium's physical transmission. That is, TV can encourage people to focus on the sensual aspects of what and who it portrays, as when viewers come to feel an intimate connection to the people they view often through the medium (Meyrowitz, 1994a), and many hours of TV viewing can encourage viewers to seek out sensual, tactile experiences when they are *not* watching television. Similarly, in McLuhan's view, when print was the dominant medium, it encouraged a general way of thinking and patterning of culture far beyond the individual act of reading. McLuhan argued that, with print, culture was transformed because mental perspectives were transformed. Print, McLuhan claimed, was different from live interaction in that it imposed a delay between action and reaction, thereby encouraging the "visual" experience of watching from a distance and the development of an uninvolved point of view. Print emphasized *lines* of sight (vs. the aural surround) and fostered the suppression of the sensual and tactile. Even with this understanding of McLuhan's ideas, however, those of us who would like to extend his work are never quite sure what terminology to use while doing it.

**Difficulty Four: Unlike many scholarly mentors, McLuhan did not encourage others to follow him by laying out a clear methodological map.** Instead, he simply gave out a battle cry and pointed in a general direction. He told us to explore the nature of technologies, not their specific uses. He told us to look at changes in the balance of the senses, the structure of the human environment, and values, not at narrow effects of media messages (such as persuasion or imitation). But he did not tell us *how* one goes about studying things such as a "shifting sensorium" or what types of behavioral changes to look for. How, for example, does one further study people who, in McLuhan's view, "live mythically and integrally"? What evidence can we gather to test, support, or disprove his claims? In short, McLuhan's contribution has been generative, rather than substantive, inspirational rather than instructional.

*So what do we do with this wonderfully rich, idiosyncratic, playful, insightful, prescient forefather of media ecology?* I believe McLuhan is too rich in insight to abandon or bypass. Yet we must do more than simply worship him. And so what I'd like to see is more media ecologists working on what I call "morphing McLuhan."

### Morphing McLuhan

ONE of the exciting things about seeing one image morph into another is to realize that two seemingly very different faces or other visual forms can be interchanged and blended in a way that illustrates their connections. (The result is much like seeing a child who somehow looks like both parents, even though the parents look nothing like each other.) In this metaphor lies a potential method for both extending and moving beyond McLuhan. I'd like to see more attempts to morph McLuhan with those who seem to know nothing about media in the McLuhanesque sense. McLuhan's work itself exemplifies this method by his unusual juxtapositions of sources and examples. And although I missed it the first five times I read *Understanding*



*Media*, McLuhan also explicitly describes this method a few times. Indeed, this may be his only reference to a kind of method.

In *Understanding Media*, for example, McLuhan (1964/1994) writes, “Arnold Toynbee is *innocent of any understanding of media* as they have shaped history, but he is full of examples that the student of media can use” (p. 18, emphasis added). McLuhan makes similar comments about Mircea Eliade and Northcote Parkinson and others in other parts of the book (pp. 112–113, 155, 263).

This method suggests we should be looking to insightful scholars in other disciplines—no matter how innocent of understanding of media they are—and adapting their work into new forms of medium analysis and theory. I offer a few brief examples to illustrate my point.

#### Four Morphings of McLuhan

**MORPHING One: McLuhan and Birdwhistell.** In his 1970 book, *Kinesics and Context*, Ray Birdwhistell describes how the study of the power and significance of body motion in natural settings was made possible by new technologies of audiovisual recording that allowed for micro-analysis of kinesic behavior. He explains how the field became viable when researchers were able to reduce analysis time from about 100 hours per second of behavior to less than one hour per second. But Birdwhistell is innocent of understanding the technologies he employs as anything but neutral recorders of the behavior he is studying.

Although McLuhan, for his part, betrayed little understanding of kinesics, his perspective allows us to see the irony of claiming, as Birdwhistell does, that one grasps kinesics in natural settings by technologically removing body language from its natural spatial and temporal context. Further, medium theory would suggest that beyond the particular research method, Birdwhistell may be unwittingly describing a new era when kinesics is being transformed and weakened by the widespread use of electronic media. We now feel less influenced by the body language of those in our local contexts, such as the home, and more affected by the kinesics of those many miles away. (We can think of the incredibly powerful visceral response people had to Princess Diana and her death, for example.) We live in a time when children and parents have to compete with TV and computer screens for each other’s gazes, and when adult kinesic “monitoring” of children and youth—which once was so powerful—is weaker. Birdwhistell describes the power of his mother’s snuffles and other forms of unspoken control. Yet a stern look from a parent or teacher seems to have much less impact on today’s youth—in their dress, gestures, body piercings, hair color, and language. McLuhan’s frameworks can be pressed to offer an explanation: that we are, in fact, living in an age of “kinesics *out of context*.”

In face-to-face interactions, any attempts to study closely the nonverbal behavior of others are muted by the fact that we are also concerned with the impressions we make with our own behavior. With a TV close-up, however, we can sit expressionless and watch others at a simulated distance of a foot or two. (Consider the contrast with the power of that distance in live interaction, where we feel overwhelmed by the sense of co-presence.) Indeed, morphing McLuhan with kinesic research might suggest that the sudden growth of the field of nonverbal communication in the 1960s and 1970s may have been stimulated by this technological disruption in the web of face-to-face interaction.

There is a similar point to observe in the related work of Albert Schefflen (1973) in his *Body Language and Social Order*. Schefflen describes in detail the ways in which body language controls behavior and maintains order and conformity. His book is full of photos illustrating his concepts. But these photos are, ironically, 1970s-era photographs of college students with wild hair, bell bottoms, and flowered shirts. Thus, the photos explicitly illustrate the body movements and facial expressions that control change while implicitly illustrating some dramatic weakening of such controls on the first TV generation.

We can see one of the political benefits of understanding this Birdwhistell/McLuhan morphed theory as municipal meetings are increasingly televised. When dozens of citizens recently went to a city council meeting at a town close to my home and protested the sale of public waterfront property to a private developer, the citizens felt entirely disempowered by the kinesic displays of the councilmen (bored faces, eating sandwiches, whispering to each other). Yet, when the larger citizenry watched those meetings on TV, they were able to observe the councilors' body language without falling under the direct spell of the kinesic displays of the powerful. As a result, they became enraged by the councilors' behaviors, and the ranks of the protestors kept swelling, leading eventually to a new city council.

In short, in morphing medium theory with kinesic theory we add to both.

**Morphing Two: McLuhan and Goffman.** Perhaps the most insightful sociologist of the middle to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Erving Goffman, was largely innocent of understanding of media. Indeed, in most of his works, he divided the universe of social interaction into two mutually exclusive categories: We are either in each other's co-presence—aware of being aware of each other—or we are alone (e.g., 1967, p. 167). This dichotomy, along with Goffman's stated emphasis on the "naked senses" (e.g., 1963, pp. 14–15), doesn't leave much room for analyzing media. Goffman also defines behavioral settings (or what he calls "regions") in terms "of any *place* that is bounded by barriers to perception" (1959, p. 106). And although Goffman is an incredibly astute observer of how people change their behaviors from one setting to another, he is largely blind to factors, including media, that alter the boundaries of social settings and thereby encourage variations in the way people change behaviors from setting to setting.

McLuhan and Goffman, therefore, have complementary strengths and weaknesses. McLuhan describes how media reshape large cultural environments, but he doesn't have much to say about the specifics of social settings or social roles. Goffman focuses on the dynamics of face-to-face interaction, but has almost nothing to say about media or about change in the settings or roles he describes.

In some of my own work (Meyrowitz, 1985), I've tried to create common-denominator concepts that link McLuhan's concepts of media environments with Goffman's concepts of situational roles in order to build a predictive—and retrodictive—theory of how changes in media alter everyday social behavior.

In a similar effort, Janet Sternberg (2001) adapted Goffman's study of *Behavior in Public Places* (1963) to a McLuhanesque understanding of *Misbehavior in Cyber Places*, the title of her doctoral thesis. As Sternberg has suggested, media ecology has been tilted toward the study of mass communication and intrapersonal communication and can be strengthened by blending it

with interpersonal communication theory. Sternberg argues that media ecology has focused too much on media as environments, and too little on social environments as media.

In bringing McLuhanesque insights into the work of Goffman and other situationists, we also bring Goffman's situationist insights into the work of McLuhan and other medium theorists.

**Morphing Three: McLuhan and Marx.** In another important example, McLuhanism and Marxism have tended to be innocent of understanding of each other. McLuhanism has paid almost no attention to the role played by powerful political and economic interests in the development of communication technologies and in the way media are employed. This serious omission has mirrored the typical weakness of the political and economic critiques, which have tended to ignore the different characteristics and influences of different media forms.

In *Marxism, Medium Theory, and American Cultural Studies* (her 1997 doctoral dissertation at the University of Iowa), Donna Flayhan has called for a fusing of these two incomplete perspectives into a coherent theory of media influences that also recognizes the pressures from the larger capitalist system and highlights the need for social activism. She argues that the materialist base of medium theory makes it quite compatible with the Marxist view of history. And although she is very critical of McLuhan's lack of attention to economics and human agency, Flayhan acknowledges that McLuhan's *Understanding Media* was a better predictor of the social changes that followed its publication than was a critical-theory work published in the same year, Herbert Marcuse's (1964) *One-Dimensional Man*.

Flayhan (1997) also notes that, ironically, the medium-theory perspective, in general, is more dialectical (at least implicitly) than much critical-theory work that explicitly espouses a dialectical approach. Thus, critical theory work, she argues, is often reduced to a "dismal distress over ideological domination" that "leads only to cynicism, pessimism, and criticism" (p. 222), while medium theory is more optimistic and more compatible with hopeful human activity for progressive social change.

Working on a related mission, Paul Grosswiler (1998) argues in his *Method is the Message* that McLuhan's theory of media and social change is less deterministic than Marxists and neo-Marxists have maintained. Grosswiler even claims that McLuhan's method resembles Marx's early humanist dialectical method. Grosswiler writes in the hope that the fields of cultural studies and postmodernism will "reappraise and reclaim" both McLuhan's and Marx's dialectical methods and their theories of technology and society.

Thus, Flayhan and Grosswiler, through their morphing of McLuhan and Marx, are working toward strengthening both.

**Morphing Four: McLuhan and Gumpert, Drucker, Habermas, Oldenburg, and others.** I have time to outline only one other of many ongoing and potential conceptual fusions: the morphing of McLuhan with various frameworks that deal in some way with the issues of public spaces and public spheres. The many insightful works of Susan Drucker and Gary Gumpert (e.g., 1997), for example, have been blending medium theory concerns with studies of law, zoning, café cultures, and privacy. Gumpert and Drucker's approach is to look at physical spaces and media as a continuum of social settings, rather than a dichotomy. This perspective could be extended by blending medium theory with the study of the rise and decline of what Jürgen Habermas

(1962/1989) has called the “bourgeois public sphere,” and with the threat to the continuation of “third places,” as analyzed by Ray Oldenburg (1989).

Habermas (1962/1989) describes the social conditions of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries—including spreading literacy—that fostered the growth of coffee shops and salons as places for rational-critical debate among members of the literate public. In these places, he argues, the quality of arguments, rather than the relative status of the participants, was determinative and could form a basis for “public opinion” and political action. But the rise of newer media systems and of advertising and public relations, Habermas argues, distorted the public sphere and manipulated public opinion. McLuhan’s theories of media, including his argument about the role of literacy in the development of individual “points of view,” can help to inform analyses of the Habermasian public sphere and its later transformations, just as Habermas’s analyses can bolster an otherwise deficient focus on political action in McLuhan’s work. Indeed, John Thompson (1995), Nick Stevenson (1995), and Paul Grosswiler (2001) have all been demonstrating the ways in which McLuhan’s theories and Habermas’s theories can enhance each other.

In *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg (1989) describes the cafés, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, bars, and other “third places” (neither home nor work) that sustain mental health and senses of community. He is more concerned with pleasure and sociability than with public opinion and political action. Oldenburg praises—and laments the decline of—the locales that foster an informal public life, where “unrelated people relate” as equals, regardless of their formal social statuses. McLuhan’s theories of media influence on experience of community and place (including his analysis of the automobile as a medium) can enrich Oldenburg’s analysis of the disappearance of “third places.”

Yet medium theory does not just mourn the loss of a Habermasian public sphere and of “third places”; it also suggests that electronic media may be fostering the creation of new and multiple sites where people gather electronically for social and political purposes, even while they are physically isolated from each other at work, at home, or elsewhere. Millions now join chat rooms, message boards, and/or email lists—where, just as in Habermas’s public sphere, the quality of individuals’ arguments is more important than their relative formal statuses and where the social “leveling” that Oldenburg praises in third places seems to be operating. The Internet and other media are also being used to bring people together in the same physical time and place for social events and culture-jamming activities (such as “whirl-marts”<sup>2</sup>), as well as for attempts to bring about political change (as in the anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle and in other protests in the U.S. and around the world). At the same time, Habermas’s and Oldenburg’s frameworks have the potential to enrich medium theorists’ understanding of the social, economic, and political distinctions between *routine* gatherings in real versus virtual “places.”

As a final example, medium theory’s generally optimistic or neutral analyses of media environments and of “information” could be fruitfully morphed with the darker theories of media and political participation, such as Noam Chomsky’s and Edward Herman’s propaganda model of the media (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Again, such a morphing would benefit both frameworks. The

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<sup>2</sup> Whirl-marts are rituals in which individuals gather and push empty shopping carts through a superstore, as a sign of resistance to mindless consumerism. For more information on them, see <http://www.breathingplanet.net/whirl/>.

propaganda model would gain a sense of how new media, such as the Internet, could serve to subvert the propaganda mechanisms of the functional alliance between business and government elites and the mainstream corporate media. McLuhan-inspired medium theory, in turn, would gain a heightened sense of the high stakes at play when new media bring the potential for new patterns of access to information—and new patterns of access to disinformation.

### Conclusion: Marshalling McLuhan

In conclusion, the world still has much to learn from McLuhanism, but the McLuhanesque perspective also has much room for enrichment. McLuhan's insights can be marshaled and enhanced by blending them with other theoretical approaches—including those perspectives embraced by scholars whom McLuhan considered technological idiots (such as content researchers and critical analysts of news). This method of morphing McLuhan with those who are innocent of understanding of media (in the McLuhanesque sense) forces us, as media ecologists, to consider frameworks that McLuhan and many of us have also been innocent of understanding.

In every morphing of McLuhan we see the value of his insights. Yet, we also start to become more aware of the limits of McLuhan's frameworks in their lack of attention to other variables—variables that point to transformations that McLuhan tended to overlook, and variables that would have provided clearer and less mystical arguments about how changes in media encourage certain physical, social, and psychological patterns.

McLuhan, who loved aphorisms, no doubt had heard versions of the very common one that “a dwarf standing on the shoulder of a giant can see farther than the giant.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, another way to summarize my remarks is to say that perhaps the best form of respect to show to McLuhan is not to kneel at his feet, or to look up at him in awe, but to make our way, slowly and deliberately, up onto his shoulders. Thank you.

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<sup>3</sup> The aphorism is often attributed to Sir Isaac Newton, who wrote a version of it in a letter in 1675, but, in a playful volume, Merton (1965) demonstrated that it goes back at least as far as Bernard of Chartres in the 12th century.

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