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## MARSHALL McLUHAN\* | LAWS OF THE MEDIA

**T**HE ATTEMPT AT categorizing human behavior has been one of the more serious games played by philosophers throughout the ages. Marshall McLuhan, whose early taxonomies of media so charged the 1960's, now offers a new schema that describes the operation, not only of media, but of all human processes, artifacts, and creations. Human activities, including media, are said to have four fundamental properties or effects—that is, their operation entails four more or less simultaneous consequences. First, the medium or process tends to intensify, enhance, or promote something. Radio, for example, promotes an instantaneous, aural type of communication. At the same time, the activity tends to antiquate or obsolesce a previously intensified process. The rise of radio tended to detract from the importance of print. This replacement effect is of course a rather obvious and oft-noted observation; but McLuhan's four-part system or "tetrad" gathers subtlety in the last two parts: for as a human activity tends to intensify one process and obsolesce another, it also tends to retrieve yet another process, one which perhaps had been previously antiquated by an earlier process. Thus, as radio obsolesces print, it recaptures the oral texture of communication which itself had been previously replaced by print. Finally (and this last effect is the only of the four that is sequential, or occurs after rather than with the other three), the process—when pushed to the limits of its potential—tends to reverse itself, or "flip" into its opposite number. Thus, acoustic radio eventually engenders pictorial television. (Note that this reversal does not necessarily yield an opposite of the intensification, merely something substantively different.)

This categorization bears a more than fleeting resemblance to Hegel's dialectic, and may be thought of as a modern, multidimensional update of Hegel's more "linear" system. Like Hegel's,

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McLuhan's "laws" postulate a cyclical evolution of human processes, encompassing both the trivial and the most profound. Take the phenomenon of "slang," epitomized by the word groovy, of 1960's parlance. The word promoted or intensified, as all slang does, a more casual type of discourse; it tended to obsolesce formal language patterns; it retrieved the emotionality and gesture characteristic of pre-linguistic communication; and it eventually reversed itself into cliché. (And if we care to follow the thread of the new cycle, cliché itself intensifies rigidity of expression, obsolesces innovation in language, retrieves the hardened categories of formal language, to at last reverse itself into . . . nostalgia.) Newtonian physics seems subject to the same pattern: it intensified a linear, sequential perspective on the universe; obsolesced the mysticism and religion of the Middle Ages; retrieved some of the Hellenistic, mechanical insights of Heron and Archimedes; and eventually reversed itself into Einsteinian relativity. And note how Copernican astronomy, operating on a different track—which McLuhan traces below—also reverses itself into the same Einsteinian terminus, which apparently serves as a point of temporary destination for a variety of cycles. (See "Tetrad Chart for the Evolution of Ideas," p. 179.)

Such examples suggest a fascinating series of analogies within the tetrad: reversal (4), for example, can be thought of as an obsolescence (2) of the intensification (1), and/or a retrieval (3) of the obsolesced (2). Yet the very scope and flexibility of McLuhan's design underscores its need for further refinement. For the theory to have genuine predictive significance, it must attempt to specify a time frame for each cycle—radio, for example, obsolesces wires as well as print, depending upon which system it functions in; and without a time boundary, the retrieval stage becomes a meaningless reach into the open-ended grab-bag of infinite history. The reversal function, as indicated above, is also a bit ambiguous and in need of explication: some of the examples McLuhan provides below suggest reversal might operate more as a type of right-angle divergence than a backwards motion. Yet the investigation of these blind spots—the filling in of the blanks in what Neil Postman has termed McLuhan's "periodic chart" of human behavior—is the challenge and fun of the theory. McLuhan offers some preliminary "charts" of a variety of human endeavors below, to which one addition can now be made: McLuhan's publication of *The Gutenberg Galaxy and Understanding Media* in the early 1960's intensified an awareness of communication structure over content; it obsolesced the previous emphasis on content; it retrieved an intuitive world-grasp that so many of our grandparents had; and it reversed itself into . . . well, read for yourself . . .

Paul Levinson

When I came across Karl Popper's principle that a scientific hypothesis is one that is capable of falsification, I decided to hypothesize the "Laws of the Media." All of man's artifacts, of language, of laws, of ideas and hypotheses, of tools, of clothing and computers—all of these are extensions of the physical human body. Hans Hass, in *The Human Animal*, sees this human power to create additional "organs" as "an enormity from the evolutionary standpoint . . . an advance laden with unfathomable consequences." The "Laws of the Media" are observations on the operation and effects of human artifacts on man and society, since, Hass further notes, a human artifact "is not merely an implement for working upon something, but an extension of our body, effected by the artificial addition of organs; . . . to which, to a greater or lesser degree, we owe our civilization."

This condition of man, surrounded by his own artifacts, is remarked on in the May, 1973 issue of *Smithsonian* by Sir Peter Medwar, whose theme is that "What's human about Man is his technology," including both his "sensory and motor accessories." After all, these sensory and motor organs "receive their instructions from ourselves." The "Laws of the Media" led me to the awareness that all our artifacts, all our "sensory and motor accessories," are in fact, *words*. All of these things are *outerings and utterings of man*.

In Douglas Fraser's *African Art as Philosophy* it is mentioned as a feature of some traditional societies that speech and weaving are synonymous:

Among the Bambara and the Dogon, the gift of weaving is closely associated with that of speech. *Soy*, the Dogon word for cloth, means "It is the spoken word" (Griaule 1948, p. 30). Weaving, along with speech, was a gift from the Creator to help man.(1)

Exploration of the "Laws of the Media" opens up the matter of the grammar and syntax of each artifact. There seem to be only four features, and they are in analogical proportion to each other:

- (a) What does it enhance?
- (b) What does it obsolesce?
- (c) What does it retrieve that had been obsoleted earlier?
- (d) What does it flip into when pushed to the limits of its potential?

When these questions had been considered with regard to dozens of media and technologies, there came a surprising discovery, namely that all the extensions of man, verbal or non-verbal, hardware or software, are essentially metaphoric in structure, and that they are in the plenary sense linguistic, a fact long accepted by the Bambara and the Dogon tribes, among many others. A "metaphor" means literally "carrying across" from Greek *metaferere* and was translated into

Latin as "translatio." In a word, metaphor is a kind of bridging process, a way of getting from one kind of experience to another. This reaching out always involves a resonating interval rather than a mere connection. When a wag said "Man's reach must exceed his grasp or what's a metaphor?" he was "right on." Each "side" of the resonating interval is an area of "touch," and in the sensory experience of "touch" there is never a connection but always a gap or an interval. Between the wheel and the axle, the interval (and not the connection) is "where the action is." That is to say, there is a large acoustic factor in touch and in metaphor alike—the audile-tactile.

From a structural "point of view" a metaphor has four terms which are discontinuous, yet in ratio to one another. Aristotle pointed this out in his *De Anima* (Book III, Chapter VIII):

It follows that the soul is analogous to the hand; for as the hand is a tool of tools, so the mind is the form of forms and sense the form of sensible things.

A four-part analogy is a *figure-ground* structure. (In a metaphor there are two *figures* and two *grounds* in ratio to one another.) Apropos the four-part structure which relates to all human artifacts (verbal and non-verbal), their existence is certainly not deliberate or intentional. Rather, they are a testimony to the fact that the mind of man is structurally inherent in all human artifacts and hypotheses whatever. Whether these ratios are also present in the structure of the "natural" world raises an entirely separate question. It is perhaps relevant to point out that the Greeks made no entelechies or studies of the effects of man-made technology, but only of what they considered the objects of the natural world.

The usual approach to metaphor is verbal rather than physically operational, as appears in *The Myth of Metaphor* by Colin Murray Turbayne:

However appropriate in one sense a good metaphor may be, in another sense there is something inappropriate about it. This inappropriateness results from the use of a sign in a sense different from the usual, which use I shall call "sort-crossing." Such sort-crossing is the first defining feature of metaphor and, according to Aristotle, its genus:

Metaphor(*meta-phora*) consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference (*epi-phora*) being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on the grounds of analogy.(2)

However, Aristotle saw four-part analogy in psychological *operations* as well:

With what part of itself the soul discriminates sweet from hot I have explained before and must now describe again as follows: That with which it does so is a sort of unity, but in the way just mentioned, i.e. as a connecting term. And the two faculties it connects, being one by analogy and numerically, are each to each as the qualities discerned are to one another (for what difference does it make whether we raise the problem of discrimination between disparities or between contraries, e.g. white and black?). Let then C be to D as A is to B: it follows *alternando* that C:A::D:B. If then C and D belong to one subject, the case will be the same with them as with A and B; A and B form a single identity with different modes of being; so too will the former pair. The same reasoning holds if A be sweet and B white.(3)

These ratios also extend to the four irreducible relations in technology. For example—THE LAWS OF EQUILIBRIUM: (A) Any input amplifies or intensifies some situation (inflates); (B) Obsolesces existing homeostasis or balance; (C) Recreates an older mode of equilibrium (e.g., Eliot—Auditory Imagination); (D) When pushed to its limits, the system reverses its modalities.

The “Laws of the Media” are structural forms closely related to metaphor. The parts of the tetrad have the same complementary character:

Retrieval is to Obsolescence as Amplification is to Reversal  
— and —

Retrieval is to Amplification as Obsolescence is to Reversal.

*METAPHOR*: (A) Enhances awareness of relations; (B) Obsolesces simile, metonymy, connected logic; (C) Retrieves understanding, “meaning” via replay in another mode; (D) Reverses into Allegory. *TETRAD*: (A) Intensifies awareness of inclusive structural process; (B) Obsolesces logical analysis and “efficient causality”; (C) Retrieval mode: Metaphor; (D) Reversal: technology (hardware) becomes word (software).

Examples of the operation of the four laws for various communication media follow.

*VERBUM* (utterance): (A) Intensifies and crystallizes percept—as word (thing); (B) Obsolesces the merely sensory via perceptual interplay; (C) Retrieval: transference of power from things to word-as-vortex; (D) Reverses into the conceptual (replay of meaning-minus-the-experience).

*SPOKEN WORD* (mirror of the mind: *canon* is mirror of the voice, when one voice repeats or reflects what another has stated): (A) “Speak that I may see thee.” (Title of book by Harold Stahmer)(4); (B) Obsolesces the subhuman; (C) Retrieves past experience; (D) Group awareness and class structure.

*SLANG*: (A) Intensifies the new; (B) Obsolesces conventional vagueness, spectrum of meanings; (C) Retrieves unconventional primal gesture; (D) Reverses into cliché.

*TALKING DRUM*: (A) Enhances resonant interval, rhythm; (B) Obsolesces the merely vocal; (C) Retrieves gesture and dance; (D) Reverses into song, sob, or scream.

*MIRROR* (*mirari*—to wonder): (A) Enhances ego by repetition and self-advertisement; echo-matching of a figure-*minus*-its-ground; instrument for *self*-portraiture (Rembrandt, etc.); adjunct of phonetic literacy via visual intensity; (print has the same effect for the user—i.e., self-advertisement); (B) Obsolesces the corporate mask and corporate appearance (costume); dress replaces costume; (C) Retrieves the mode of Narcissus (magic, metamorphic tunnel vision); mirror as sitter, painter as audience and as admirer; (D) Reverses into “making” process as outlook becomes insight.

*PRINTED WORD*: (A) Amplifies private authorship, the competitive, goal-oriented individual; (letters are an extension of the teeth, the only lineal and repetitive part of the body; as Harold Innis explains, writing on paper leads to military bureaucracies); (B) Obsolesces slang, dialects, and group identity; separates composition and performance, divorces eye and ear; (C) Retrieves tribal elitism, charmed circles, the “neck verse”; (print makes everyone a reader, and Xerox makes everyone a publisher); (D) With flip from manuscript into mass production via print, there comes the corporate reading public and the “historical sense.”

*RADIO*: (A) Enhances simultaneous access to the entire planet: “On the air you’re everywhere!”; (B) Obsolesces wires and cables and physical bodies; end of rational and lineal; end of Euclidean space; end of Western Time and Space; (C) Retrieves tribal ecological environments—trauma, paranoia, and the primacy of the right hemisphere of the brain; (radio was the hidden ground to the figure of the retrieved Prohibition of drug abuse in the television age); (D) World reverses into “talking picture”—audience as actor participating in its own actor-experience.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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TETRAD CHART FOR THE EVOLUTION OF IDEAS:  
THEORIES OF MOTION

	ARISTOTLE'S LAW OF MOTION	IMPETUS	INERTIA (NEWTON'S 1st LAW OF MOTION)	ACCELERATION (NEWTON'S 2nd LAW)	REACTION (NEWTON'S 3rd LAW)	COPERNICAN REVOLUTION	EINSTEINIAN SPACE-TIME RELATIVITY
INTENSIFIES	prime mover Zeus	transitory character of motion	isolation (abstraction of figure from ground)	causative sequence (continuous force)	action/reaction simultaneity (equilibrium)	the sun as central	interplay & flux of space/time (interchangeability of figure/ground)
OBSOLESCES	animism	prime mover	change (interaction of figure and ground)	inertia	the sequential	the earth	absolute space and time (Newtonian measuring sticks)
RETRIEVES	moral order Heracitus	animism (Divine Animal)	homeostasis (static balance)	kinetic equilibrium	Euclidian geometry; Aristotle	Aristarchus (sun-centered)	non-measurable void (resonant interval)
REVERSES INTO	impetus	inertia (stasis)	acceleration	simultaneity (disequilibrium — interaction; retroaction; electric polarity)	relativity	relativity	the next Law of Physics (not yet discovered . . . )