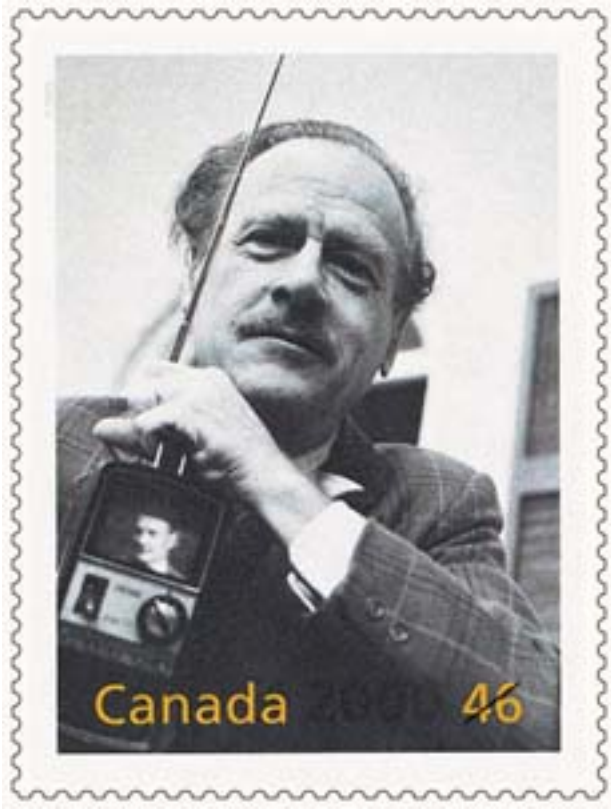


Marshall McLuhan

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Herbert Marshall McLuhan ([July 21, 1911](#) - [December 31, 1980](#)) was a [Canadian](#) [educator](#), [academic](#), [philosopher](#), and one of the founders of modern [media studies](#). McLuhan became a [pop culture](#) figure in the [1960s](#) with the publication of his seminal work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* ([McGraw-Hill](#), 1964) and *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (with designer Quentin Fiore, Random House, 1967

In the year 2000, in recognition of his lasting global influence he was honored by the government of Canada with his image on a [postage stamp](#).

McLuhan was born in [Edmonton, Alberta,Canada](#), to Elsie and Herbert McLuhan and raised in a Baptist Scotch-Irish family. He would later convert to [Roman Catholicism](#) and he would remain a strong Catholic throughout his life and career. Some argue that his religion played a heavy role in

his philosophical studies.

On this question Page 60 of *Understanding Media* contains the seed of enlightenment that does not germinate into full flower until Stoddart's posthumous publication of *The Medium And The Light* in 1999. On page 60 of UM, McLuhan tells us that "Except for light, all other media come in pairs, with one acting as the content of the other, obscuring the operation of both."

In TMATL, on page 103, he delivers the smoking gun punchline of what he meant all along: "In Jesus Christ, there is no separation or distance between the medium and the message; it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same." Christ was the Light of the world. McLuhan's whole life was coded theology in the new language of new media. All he discovered was a new metaphor to preach the old truth. From his first published article G.K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic (Dalhousie Review 15, 1936) to his last (his tombstone, "The truth will set you free"), his entire life was a witness to a single solitary Fact -- a Fact about which he said, "The revealed and divinely constituted fact of religion has nothing to do with human opinion or human adherence." (p 85, TMATL).

McLuhan felt that an understanding of media could bring spiritual enlightenment to mankind. Similarly, McLuhan developed the idea of the Global Village to express the view that the effects of extending the human nervous system outside the human body reembody self in the form of a global communication network. A related concept exists that although developed separately closely parallels his own. It is Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's idea of the noosphere; a layer of collective spiritual consciousness that de Chardin believed was enveloping the world.

Author Tom Wolfe stated that McLuhan might be the most important thinker since Darwin, Newton, Einstein, and Freud. Wolfe made the association between his ideas and de Chardin's more explicitly. However, de Chardin drew from religion and Charles Darwin's, theory of evolution for his ideas. The noosphere was for him a logical extension to a succession of layers of evolution that emanated from the core of the earth. De Chardin, was a paleontologist, a geologist and a former Roman Catholic priest. He was excommunicated from the Catholic church for his

radical departure from [creationist](#) church doctrine. To this day de Chardin's more controversial ideas are suppressed from some Catholic teaching.

McLuhan observed media and believed that communications media evolved from themselves. McLuhan's own radical departures from conventional academic inquiry remain controversial and poorly understood today. However as an example of how sought after and influential his opinions became, McLuhan served as special envoy for education to the [Vatican](#). He also advised the US government on a media education curriculum. The latter commission resulting in the first draft for *Understanding Media* one of his classic books.

As a student at Cambridge University in England he employed the techniques of his teacher [I.A. Richards](#), and the [new criticism](#). The new criticism employed a multilevel approach to the study of literature that he then applied to media in general beginning with [advertising](#) with great success. This multileveled analysis was the basis of what McLuhan referred to as probes and resulted in the many aphoristic phrases which found wide application, and acceptance for which he is especially well known. One of these aphoristic probes appears as a McLuhan quote on the [autodidacticism](#) (self-education) page.

Famous for aphorisms like "The medium is the message" (he later published a book whose title was a play on this phrase - *The medium is the massage*) and "the global village", McLuhan became one of the early purveyors of the [sound bite](#). In *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*, McLuhan allegedly coined the term "[software](#)", but the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) traces usage of the word back to 1960. The phrase "[global village](#)" was coined by McLuhan in 1959, and appears in 1962's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, his study of the psychological and cognitive effects of standardised printing. The title of the same book was the origin of the term "[Gutenberg Galaxy](#)".

In 1946 McLuhan was hired to teach English at the Catholic [University of St. Michael's College](#), at the [University of Toronto](#), where he taught until his death in 1980, and during which time he wrote his most famous books.

In the many pages of the books he wrote there he asserted that each different medium is an

extension of the senses that affects the individual and society in distinct and pervasive ways, further classifying some media as "hot" -- media which engage one's senses in a high-intensity, exclusive way, such as typography, radio, and film -- and other media as "cool" -- media of lower resolution or intensity, that require more interaction from the viewer, such as the telephone and the television. While many of his pronouncements and theories have been considered impenetrable, and by some absurd, or unfalsifiable in scientific terms. McLuhan's central message -- that to understand today's world, one must actively study the effects of media -- remains ever more true in the electronic age.

Wired magazine named McLuhan its patron saint when the magazine launched in 1993.).In fact "Wired style" in it's early days was almost identical to the style introduced by McLuhan and Fiore in *The medium is the Massage*. McLuhan's work is sometimes compared with that of a futurist. This may be due to the wide sweep of his ideas and his stature as a visionary. Similarly today many see the internet and cyberspace as the prophetic fruition of his ideas.

McLuhan appeared as himself in Woody Allen's 1977 film Annie Hall.This cameo performance in which he comes to his own defense when he proclaims to another professor that he knows nothing of his work, is testament to McLuhan's fame and stature as a sixties popular culture icon.

McLuhan's demise at the dawn of the electronic revolution was untimely, Along with other prominent public personalities Woody Allen petitioned the University of Toronto to keep the Centre for Studies in Culture and Technology open to continue his studies on media. While he was alive many other luminaries of the 1960's visited McLuhan at the centre including the Beatles and then Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau.

Arguably what made McLuhan a "media guru" to sixties pop culture mavens in the "TV age", also made him "the patron saint" of the "electronaissance" to a new generation in the extended era of electronic media known as secondary orality. This is a term that was coined by Walter Ong who was a graduate student of his. Secondary orality is characterized by the presence, growth and spread of media , new media, multimedia, and digital communications networks.

McLuhan once stated that he considered all of his work to be a "footnote" to the work of Harold

Innis. Harold Innis, was a well known Canadian scholar and economist and a student of Meade and Parkes and the Chicago School of Sociology. Harold Innis also influenced the development of ideas on the nature and significance of communications media to culture *Communication and Empire* and *The Bias of Communication* demonstrate the genesis and evolution of his ideas. As irony would have it, McLuhan and Innis never met or collaborated in any real sense. They are however, considered to be two of the founding pillars of the Toronto School of Communication. Another scholarly collaboration that McLuhan was to have made but never took place was with the legendary advertizing designer Tony Schwartz. Schwartz wrote two books on media and communication *The Responsive Chord* and *Media: The Second God* McLuhan and Schwartz were to have shared the Albert Schweitzer chair at Fordham University. Major health problems prevented McLuhan from taking up the chair.

McLuhan is universally acknowledged as the philosophical founder of the discipline of media ecology, a term McLuhan himself coined. Arguably the central problem that this emerging discipline seeks to address is the digital divide. An axiom that describes a growing gulf between those who have no access to information and those that have access to too much information. The causes of this phenomena are complex. A related phenomena is the disappearance of written text as the dominant mode of communication and expression of thought in Western society. This is being replaced by the uncontrollable and pervasive influence of nearly contentless, lightspeed acoustic media technology such as television and the internet which is also a text-based electronic medium.

Successors to McLuhan in this field, or those arguably influenced by him are numerous. They include Neil Postman, who is the author of many books on media and education and founder of the first school of media ecology studies at New York University. Another is Derrick de Kerckhove who is the author of *Connected Intelligence*. De Kerckhove was McLuhan's student, translator and later his successor as director at the Program for Studies in Culture and Technology founded by McLuhan at the University of Toronto. Another important influence is Eric McLuhan, McLuhan's son and co-author with him of "Laws of Media". Eric McLuhan is also the author of *Electric Language*. Paul Levinson who was also a friend of McLuhan's is the author of *Digital*

McLuhan. [Jean Baudrillard](#) a post-modern educator and philosopher perhaps best known for his theories of [hyperreality](#), is sometimes referred to in a popular sense as "the European McLuhan."

Perhaps as a measure of the scope of his ambitions McLuhan had intimated through journals in his early life his intention to codify a set of universal or general laws at some point in his career. His fulfillment of this ambition is best exemplified by *Laws of Media*. Arguably it represents a concerted effort to make explicit a [unified field theory](#) of culture.

McLuhan's wide intellectual influence extends to other branches of thought and learning such as [cultural studies](#) and [communication studies](#) as well as media studies. His work heavily influenced intellectual discourse on [popular culture](#) and scholarly [popular culture studies](#). McLuhan's work is linked to other philosophical movements of the [Twentieth Century](#) such as [postmodernism](#) especially through its precursor deconstruction and [Derrida](#) and the disciplines of [linguistics](#) and [semiotics](#) through the work of [Ferdinand de Saussure](#) and with the study of [mass media](#). According to deconstructive readers, one of the phallogocentrisms of modernism is the distinction between speech (logos) and writing, with writing historically being thought of as derivative to logos.

As part of subverting the presumed dominance of logos over text, Derrida showed that the idea of a speech-writing dichotomy contains within it the idea of a very expansive view of textuality that subsumes both speech and writing. Deconstruction, text can be thought of as "dead", in the sense that once the markings are made, the markings remain in suspended animation and do not change in themselves. Thus, what an author says about her text doesn't revive it, and is just another text commenting on the original, along with the commentary of others.

In this view, when an author says, "You have understood my work perfectly," this utterance constitutes an addition to the textual system, along with what the reader said was understood in and about the original text, and not a resuscitation of the original dead text. The reader has an opinion, the author has an opinion. Communication is possible not because the text has a transcendental signification, but because the brain tissue of the author contains similar "markings" or [signs](#) as the brain tissue of the reader. These brain markings, however, are unstable and fragmentary.

For many McLuhan's ideas will always be associated with the tumult of the 1960's. The University of Toronto never saw fit to have a Phd program in media studies. But the U of T brand, McLuhan's legacy and the centre he founded there that now bears his name are forever linked. Meanwhile worldwide a revival in the relevance of his way of looking at and solving problems is underway as universities scramble to fashion a response to the knowledge explosion. Universities that under print regimes produced 1-2% of new knowledge per year are imploding when faced with the new electronic environment that doubles new knowledge every few years. Instituting media studies programs are part of a strategy to remain relevant and to avoid the kind of knowledge obsolescence McLuhan was concerned about.

McLuhan died New Years Eve December 31, 1980 of a cerebral stroke which rendered him speechless during the last year of his life. The inscription on his headstone is from the new testament.

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External link

- [UbuWeb Marshall McLuhan](http://www.ubu.com/sound/mcluhan.html) (*http://www.ubu.com/sound/mcluhan.html*) featuring the LP *The Medium is the Massage*
- [Official Site](http://www.marshallmcluhan.com/) (*http://www.marshallmcluhan.com/*)

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