

[Editorial]

Rose Ph.

*Dedicated to the memory of Eric McLuhan (1942-2018) –
esteemed friend and colleague*

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF ERIC MCLUHAN (1942-2018) – ESTEEMED FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE

Phil Rose, PhD

Anne Innis-Daag recently reminded me that her father, the foundational Canadian communication scholar Harold Adams Innis, visited Russia in 1945 for the 220th anniversary celebrations that marked the founding of the country's *Academy of Sciences*. It is now exactly a year ago since I myself had the privilege of visiting Russia, specifically Moscow's National Research University Higher School of Economics for its "Third International Scientific-Practical Conference on Media Literacy, Media Ecology, and Media Education". Among the many highlights of my trip, and the most important, of course, were the people I had the opportunity to meet, including of course those I'd previously met in North America, but also the kind students who did so much to make my trip so wonderful. Another highlight of my stay of course was to receive the invitation to co-edit this special issue with Varvara Chumakova.

In this regard, 2017 marked fifty years since the publication of Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore's book *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967), which sought to popularize McLuhan's central theses about the environmental changes that new media help to bring about. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), McLuhan originally proposed the formula "the medium is the message", but the error that appeared in the former book's title was to become a catalyst for considerable discussion within media studies. This formula has been interpreted in different ways, but it primarily highlights that the very form of communication influences certain patterns of reality construction encoded within the message itself: that is, the form and content of communication are inextricably linked. The medium as "massage", however, indicates that media have direct effects on their users as well. Other variants of this formula have appeared. "The medium is the mass age" and "the medium is the mess age" refer us not only to the problems of mass culture, which flourished in the middle of the 20th century; but also to various criticisms of this development, including the cultural issues associated with symbol drain and information overload. "Mess", after all, is a sort of rubbish, clutter, or disorder.

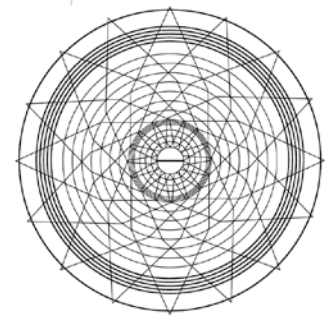
In remarking upon how McLuhan's language was often more poetic than philosophical, Donald Theall (1994) – McLuhan's first graduate student at the University of Toronto -- had the following to say:

[Editorial]

Rose Ph.

Dedicated to the memory of Eric McLuhan (1942-2018)

– esteemed friend and colleague

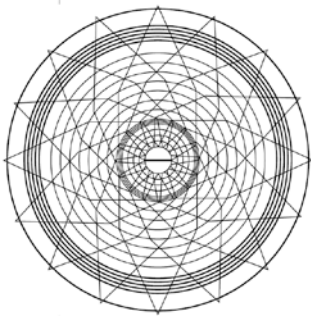


This is what attracted the attention of such diverse people as John Cage, Hubert Humphrey, Pierre Trudeau, Yoko Ono, Stan Brakhage, Frank Zappa, Woody Allen, and many others to his work. Aphorisms such as "the medium is the message" could, like mystical mantras, spin off a multitude of meanings, initiating in the process a multitude of new ways of looking at, exploring, feeling about, and adapting to technological change (12).

McLuhan's formula has pretty much become a cliché, and one which various authors fill with their own meaning. Neil Postman, for example, in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985), proposed the formula "the medium is the metaphor". For Postman, a specialist in linguistics, general semantics, and the philosophy of symbolic form, of paramount interest and akin to the Lothmannian 'semiosphere' were the information environment's signs and symbols. Postman's student, Lance Strate, in turn, suggested in an essay of the same name that "the medium is the memory", developing the idea that archival media expand our collective memory, as well as the ability to have vivid ideas about historical events and our own past. A recent article in the journal *Computers and Society* appeared with the same formula in its title, and Paul Grosswiler's *The Method is the Message* (1998) should also come to mind. Undoubtedly, McLuhan's formula continues to allow us to talk about modern culture. Accordingly, Lev Manovich, in his article for the 2014 special issue of *Visual Culture*, dedicated to the 50th anniversary of McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, proposed the formula "the software is the message", so as to emphasize how software now participates in the reality construction of technology users.

In this spirit, McLuhan's former collaborator Robert Logan begins the English portion of this special issue with his contribution "The Medium is the Mess-iah", and provides background to some of McLuhan's experimentation with his own popular saying. After tracing the concept of 'messiah' back to Judaism through Christianity and Islam, he posits that digital culture has enjoyed its own messiah in the person of Steve Jobs, and that those Logan refers to as the singularitarians – who anticipate the coming of the Singularity – have two fundamental beliefs. First, that this event will usher in "the end of days as we know them", and second that "artificial general intelligence will provide a mechanism for everlasting life as [people] upload their brains to an AI configured super-computer". Logan notes how religious or messianic connotations have in the past been attached to technological development in general, but, for the singularitarians, it is artificial intelligence specifically that will be the savior that redeems us from our mortality.

Next, in his analysis of online shopping in "McLuhan in the Digital Marketplace", Brian Gilchrist focuses too upon "the medium is the message". But Gilchrist also articulates how "the medium is the message" can be translated into "the physis is the nomos", and identifies McLuhan as a significant contributor to what is known as 'the Nomos-Physis Debate'. *Nomos* signifies ideas, ideals, or abstractions while *physis*



[Editorial]

Rose Ph.

*Dedicated to the memory of Eric McLuhan (1942-2018) –
esteemed friend and colleague*

represents the material world and all things found within it, and Gilchrist outlines how the two philosophical camps that emerged in relation to this age old debate tend to be broken down into Platonists, who favor *nomos*, and Aristotelians, who privilege *phusis*. Recognizing its centrality within the debate, Gilchrist suggests that the process of mediation and the language we use to describe it should not be conceived of digitally, i.e. as *nomos* or *phusis*, but analogically, involving both *phusis* and *nomos*, as is inherent in McLuhan's media ecological approach. The thrust of Gilchrist's analysis is then directed towards demonstrating how the digital marketplace functions as a medium that privileges *nomos* over *phusis* by both making online shoppers discarnate and by transforming goods and services into information.

Shifting our focus towards tradition and the cultural environments of orality, print literacy, and what Walter Ong calls "secondary orality", Chumakova and Fedotova discuss the fate of oral story-telling in the digital environment. The authors discuss how the information environments of different cultures follow different paths of evolution, and though it is well-known that Gutenberg's invention deprived oral traditions of some of their characteristics, the researchers report that for some of the performers that they interviewed, the technology brought by outsiders was important in preserving the tradition. While the researchers note that it is impossible to generalize about uses of the Internet and attitudes towards it, all the storytellers are indeed represented online. With video as the preferred format (though not all performers are represented online by choice), all of the researchers' informants explain that the Internet helps them to convey tradition to a broader audience. The interviewees generally note, however, that it is impossible to learn the traditions simply with the recordings produced, locality being perceived as still important for the sustenance and transmission of traditional storytelling.

Finally, in "The Medium is NOT the message", Susan Barnes uses McLuhan's phrase to elucidate the difference between psychics and mediums, detailing how the latter have their basis in Spiritualism and Natural Law. Barnes, an original graduate of New York University's program in Media Ecology and a former student of Neil Postman, writes that McLuhan's own forecasting predicted a future that "denies spirituality and replaces it with terrorism, chaos, and addiction". Therefore, she posits that the messages conveyed by Spiritualist mediums could help to counterbalance the contemporary negative influence of technology, materialistic values, and violence, since spiritual messages are generally positive in character and rooted in concepts of love and kindness.

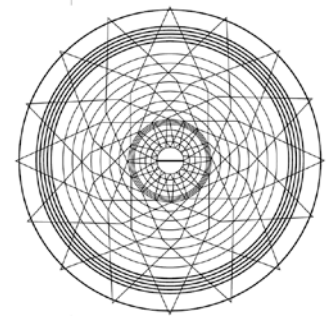
And speaking of love and kindness, as I write the world has sadly just learned of the passing of Eric McLuhan. I first became aware of Eric in the late 1990s, just after the publication of his book *Electric Language: Understanding the Present*, a copy of which a friend gave to me after being Eric's student at the Harris Institute in Toronto around that time. Having read the younger McLuhan prior to reading any of his father's work, I am thus perhaps a rarity among McLuhan scholars. I first met Eric in 2003, and

[Editorial]

Rose Ph.

Dedicated to the memory of Eric McLuhan (1942-2018)

– esteemed friend and colleague



not long after this time, he shared with me an essay that he'd recently written called "On Formal Cause". Apart from its importance as a fundamental piece of work, the essay was to inspire me to begin to study ancient Greek, and it found its way into the journal *Explorations in Media Ecology* in 2005. But because the publisher of the time was unable to handle the Greek characters, Eric always wanted to republish it, so that the definitive version would contain the original Greek passages he wanted to include. As it turned out, I was able to help him prepare the manuscript for the volume *Media and Formal Cause* (2011), in which that piece is collected, alongside three relevant early articles by Marshall McLuhan that likewise probe the topic. The momentousness of this release was to inspire the 2017 collection of essays edited by Corey Anton, Robert Logan, and Lance Strate called *Taking Up McLuhan's Cause: Perspectives on Media and Formal Causality*. Eric very kindly wrote a forward to the book, a collection of work that not only provides an example of his impressive scholarly influence, but also of his extraordinary collegiality. Along with many of my international colleagues, I will dearly miss his gracious presence, and it is to his loving memory that we dedicate this special issue.