ON UNDERSTANDING McLuhan

An analysis from a marxist standpoint of Marshall McLuhan's theory of the mass communication media by a lecturer in Psychology at the University of Sydney.

MARSHALL McLuhan proposes a socio-historical theory of communication media, that is, a theory which purports to explain the transformations undergone by societies of all kinds throughout all previous epochs up to and including the present, in terms of the historically transforming powers of the media of communication.

This theory is perhaps best summarised and synthesised in McLuhan's Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. He presents his theory in "mosaic" rather than "linear" form, that is, he operates somewhat in the manner of a television news documentary producer building up, bit by bit, a graphic, visual, almost "tactile" picture of some segment of historical reality; not in the manner of an author developing a carefully reasoned verbal argument in terms of facts and figures. Like the film producer, McLuhan takes for granted all sorts of propositions which would first of all need to be thoroughly documented and argued out before one could go along with his impressionistic style of communicating his version of the history of social communication and of the socially transforming powers of the communication media. For example, nothing much is said by McLuhan of the relative merits of his own theory, which more or less writes off the questions of ownership and control of these media as issues of little importance.

Although McLuhan is an irresponsible and adventurist romanticiser of social history, with as little concern to distinguish the factual from the facetious as the most cynical Madison Avenue huckster, he may yet nevertheless, whether he cares or not, sometimes be saying some things about the social role of media history which are both new and true, and which may explain his impact on, for example, elements of the New Left, who are by no means suckers for the Madison Avenue line.

Essentially McLuhan argues that throughout human history to date successive expansions of the production bases of societies have been comparable to an extension of the musculature of mankind.
However, the effect on mankind itself of increasingly standardised production methods and commodity-based cultures has been “fragmenting”, “de-tribalising”, and “explosive”. It has ended in fact in a virtual elimination of communal consciousness and in the alienation of man from his own subjective choice possibilities (he no longer has the capacity to propose projects to himself which will be meaningful to him). It has alienated him from his objective role in society (he does not see the point in what he is doing and may as well stop doing it as continue) and from society itself (he does not see any pattern in his society, he does not see it embodying any values, he does not see it as going anywhere, he does not care if it is — he is normless, drifting, listless, powerless).

McLuhan goes on to argue that the increasingly frenzied drive towards higher levels of production has taken on a dialectically antithetic quality which could only be re-synthesised by the advent of electronic technology (computers, automation, television, etc.). If he were a marxist he would say that this stage is precisely that of negating the contradictory thesis of fragmentation, de-tribalisation and “explosion”. As he expresses it we are now in the stage of synthesis, wherein the continuation of such technological and social progress begins to assume the form of an extension of man’s nervous system, including the sense organs. This new, synthesising stage, McLuhan would say, arrived with “instant” technology, that is, with the discovery and practical application of physical processes which take place at the speed of light. Early, and relatively simple, examples of this would be the discovery of electricity and magnetism, the development of a formal theory of electromagnetism in physics, and the invention of electrical lighting, telegraphic communication, telephony, and so on.

During this phase of “neural extension”, the assembly-line standardisation of work, fragmenting and alienating the worker’s personality, begins to yield to the flexibly programmed routines of automated processes which in this final phase — negation of the negation — will progressively develop the synthesis of Man given back to himself as “integral” Man, whose consciousness is in tune with, but not dominated and controlled by, the production processes of his work. At this stage the worker no longer has to enter into relations of production in the role of servant to the machine, which his master owns, but as partner in a process of integrated control of information flow. The control of the means of production could be centralised in the hands of a rich and powerful few, but not control of the means of communication. Thus because of the altogether transformed nature of the relations of production brought about by the revolutionary qualitative change on the capital equipment side of the forces of production, the worker is no longer seen as exploited and alienated in his
work, but involved in some universally recognised form of collective ownership and control (a newer and higher stage of the "managerial revolution"?) with the totality of his society in the production of wealth and abundance.

But not merely that. Abundance brings the ready satisfaction of sheer material needs to such an extent that Man's consciousness is no longer dominated by the "hot" motives of competition for scarce resources; his involvement, becoming more "transcendental", "oriental", and expressing his true existential possibilities for being, no longer the being of a sheer beast of burden, takes on a detached, patterned, "cool" quality, which McLuhan takes to be more characteristic of oriental modes of consciousness. (Inside North Vietnam? Amongst the Chinese comrades or the Red Guards?) It is more likely that when McLuhan says "oriental" he is thinking of phenomena such as Flower Power, the later Beatles, the Maharishi, etc., in a context of quite advanced — and commercial — occidental society. This is the sort of simplistic inexactitude that McLuhan indulges in. But that does not mean we can dismiss the underlying idea that he has here.

Materialism gives way to formalism, grim social realism to a form of "fun romanticism", not merely in the work and market relations but in relations throughout the whole of social and personal life. With the freeing of Man's intellect from the fetters of material needs, consciousness in-and-for itself comes to transcend action and develop towards the "psychedelic" norm of "cool", "orientalised", but re-vitalised and "re-tribalised" involvement with his own and others' lives. This stage of increasingly rapid resynthesis of man's nature and personality with his social world is McLuhan's "implosion" stage, heralded after many millennia of mechanical "explosion" of society and personality by the discovery of a totally new form of production base, electronic technology.

Thus, to summarise, the original long-drawn-out phase of "explosion" of man's consciousness and social relationships corresponded to the historical necessity of continuous increase of industrial production through accumulation of industrial capital, and later finance-capital. McLuhan treats the concept of money quite intelligently as developing new forms and tendencies with the advance of society, indeed as evolving towards the form of a silent communication and control system influencing and transforming to an increasing extent the nature and directions of flow and processing of material goods in the world. Firstly money was of necessity just one other form of material commodity; later as "credit" it began to exert something like mechanical power, that is it increased the resources immediately within the grasp of the entrepreneur; finally for the modern industrial magnates and finance-capitalists
it has become a very highly refined and subtle behind-the-scenes communication-control system which affects the lives of us all in ways which McLuhan thinks resemble the "cooling" effects of television. In the affluent society money — or lack of it! — is a less than tangible phenomenon, he argues. McLuhan then goes on to argue, however, that this development of intangibility amounts to a substantial dilution of capitalism! He seems to have the idea that because big businessmen can go merrily on writing dud cheques without being pulled up for a long time, and then only mildly, the rest of us are in this happy position too. Clearly McLuhan has no conception of the existence of class, and simply does not realise that dressing up the money values and commercialised standards of commodity capitalism in communication-control jargon does not by any means banish the spook of class exploitation. Like the ghost of Banquo, this blood-stained spook simply refuses to leave the merry revellers' feasting table in response to a cheery pat on the back from a bourgeois apologist like McLuhan.

However, there is quite some discernment in the notion that the long-drawn-out phase of "extension of musculature", that is, increase in economic production capacity by means of sheer mechanical power, brought "explosive" effects — internationally, in the form of capitalist wars, psychologically in the form of alienation of the workers, fragmentation of their personalities, and indeed of their very lives.

The more rapidly developing phase of "implosion" (that is, concentration and integration) of man's consciousness and social international relations, corresponds to the "negation of the negation" of man; that is, the re-synthesis of man, brought about by the necessity to increase production beyond previous physical limits by the exploitation of automated control processes, in other words, by a phenomenon tantamount to an extension of man's nervous system and sense organs. (When McLuhan says "The medium is the message", he appears to mean that the message for the modern generation in any society is this change in emphasis from "means of production" to "means of communication", or media, as the fundamental source of different possible life-styles and life chance.) McLuhan sometimes hints at an ultimate phase in which new contradictions arise and are involved in a new, but this time positive explosion of man's creative forces. For this time the "explosion" will be purely one of creative consciousness. That is, it will transcend all considerations of material production, these having now become irrelevant to the achievement of dignity, wisdom and happiness, because machines now do the hackwork for the brain, not merely for the muscles of man. This stage would also spell the "end of ideology" since all economic systems
would be perfectly flexible and there would be no more point in the exploitation of man by man.

"Or would there?" one is prompted to ask. The advent of electronics and automation processes may speed up man's productivity to unimagined levels, but this does not necessarily bring about qualitative, or even marked quantitative, changes in the forms of this production, or the share of the masses in it. Thus, industrial productivity, along with mankind's total material wealth, increased enormously between the invention of the potter's wheel and the invention of the steam engine. Were the workers caught up in the Industrial Revolution, together with their families and children, substantially better off therefore than the slaves who toiled to build the Pharaohs' pyramids? McLuhan may therefore be justly criticised for the tendency to envisage historical change as occurring of itself in a positive and progressive way.

The point remains that "implosion" notwithstanding, the problems of ownership and control, and hence of exploitation of man by man, remain to haunt the "electromag" society and its relations of production. The speed-up in productive efficiency and especially the flow of social communication through the media, does not necessarily enforce a more egalitarian sharing of profits. In fact, as the present writer suggested in a report to the Australian Psychological Society, the mass media monopoly tendencies of capitalist societies actually introduce qualitatively different methods of extracting surplus-value, by the exploitation of man as consumer.

In this article the currently orthodox sociological theory that the mass media leadership in a capitalist society does not wield any powerful politico-economic influence was challenged on a number of grounds. For example, both laboratory and field studies have shown that under appropriate conditions even non-monopoly propaganda and persuasion can be exercised effectively. In any case, the notion that mass media control in a capitalist society is non-monopolistic and publicly responsible is quite fallacious. It is merely that great pains are taken by the mass media spokesmen to project such an image.

A model of social learning was suggested to explain the mechanism by means of which nowadays the increasingly privatised individual is manipulated to adopt reflexly and unconditionally the values of capitalism. According to this model there are basically three stages to the process of persuasive indoctrination: (a) exposure-conditioning, (b) conformity-inculcation, (c) material-reward motivation. The response-sequences to be learned by the consumer are, correspondingly: (a) novelty and arousal-seeking, (b) norm-conformity rehearsal, with "denial" of conflicting stimuli, (c) purchasing-consummation.
This model implies a re-application of the surplus-value theory in the context of relations of distribution. Instead of a rake-off going to the capitalist primarily in terms of a legalistically enforced garnishee on the worker's wages, the process now involves a permanent, systematically applied short-changing of the consumer. But in fact worker and consumer are one and the same individual; hence nothing fundamental is changed under "liberal" capitalism; it is merely that community resources are surreptitiously tapped off from a different stage in the exchange cycle.

In Australia, a semi-planned Keynesian economy merely holds the most obvious abuses of capitalism in abeyance for the time being. However, the capitalist has found, in the mass persuasion of the individual as consumer in this century, a more convenient substitute for the now altogether too explosive strategy of mass coercion of the individual as worker. This is possible because the capitalist has finally succeeded in formidably centralising the means of social communication, over and above the means of distribution — and, of course, production. The same old expansionist and exploitative goals are still relentlessly pursued by the capitalist, but he now pursues them, for preference, by exploiting his massively centralised means of social communication to ensure that the individual in society learns behaviour patterns which reward the individual a little, and the capitalist a great deal more. The privatised, unorganised consumer is exploited quite cynically, like an obligingly lifeless puppet, yet comes to obtain absolutely no insight into this process because his social alienation has proceeded far beyond that of the nineteenth century worker, who was at the very least aware of the existence and grosser effects of antagonistic class relations.

The method of manipulation is murderously simple and effective. All lines of social communication are straddled by the capitalist press and its adjuncts, with a resulting fractionation of the intelligentsia, the means of production of free expression being withheld at pleasure from all except the capitalist's own hirelings, spokesmen and stooges. Free speech in the community is thus much more seriously endangered than it would be by attempts at blatant political proscription. Yet the above may overrate the degree of solidarity and infallibility of the architects of mass persuasion working through media both “cool” and “hot” on behalf of power factions in the ruling class.

McLuhan's concept of “implosion”, or the contraction of man's social world today to the dimensions of one big village, was dramatically exemplified by the support for the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia by controlling and supporting elements of the mass media in that country during the recent very regrettable phase of armed intervention by the Warsaw Pact powers.
Much of what McLuhan has to say is sound enough if taken on this large scale. In detail, however, he makes up his own history to suit himself, and this is no light fault.

Also, writing from his privileged, disengaged, almost facetious point of view, he continually gives the impression that he thinks ideas, not men, make history. In this way he is tacitly as subjectivist and anti-realist as Hegel himself. If Marx stood Hegel on his head, as he said, then McLuhan has stood Marx on his head in turn in interpreting the social role and history of social communication and its institutions in an array of clever half-truths and subjectivist speculations. Indeed, one would be tempted to say that McLuhanism is marxism rewritten as farce. There is a sense in which this would be no joke, but a simple, literal truth. At the same time, to look on the positive side, much of what McLuhan has to say will make much better sense if we mentally “stand McLuhan on his head”, in his turn.

For what McLuhan is saying, really, is that the present epoch is one of potential (McLuhan himself would say “inevitable”) re-synthesis of man’s personality. He assumes that this process of “implosion” cannot fall short of uniting mankind peacefully.

In fact, McLuhan is saying implicitly that the sheer existence of electronic media (television, computers, automation processes, etc.) enjoin upon elites the necessity to upgrade the level of social and technical training granted to the masses. For example, the mass media owners have had to support, and indeed encourage, policies of educating the masses to adequate levels of not only alphabetical but also social literacy. Nowadays they are obliged to seek constantly higher levels of “consumer-readership-listenership-viewership” training, just as the earlier capitalists were obliged to train the workers to at least minimal levels of basic trades skills — thus in both cases inevitably raising the levels of potential social awareness, and finally of political and historical consciousness.

With this increase in levels of social awareness, McLuhan reasons, man’s involvement in social problems becomes “cooler” (that is, less emotional but more intellectual probing) and more of a “mosaic” kind (that is, more precisely patterned, less ideologically fixed but adhering more closely to personal, social and material reality). That is, he comes to see social problems in a more complex way than the industrial working class did a century ago. This is indeed objectively necessary for him, inasmuch as not only relations of production but all social, economic and political relations have developed to higher levels of complexity in the intervening years.

It does mean, though, that undifferentiated emotional appeals and slogans are now anachronistic and inappropriate. For the industrial worker of two, three, four or more generations ago, the
realities of social exploitation and class antagonisms were simple, harsh and stark. To agitate the masses during that phase it was of first importance to concentrate on the broad general outlines of the mighty problems which loomed ahead of the proletariat and their leaders at that stage of the class struggle.

Nowadays, however, a great deal more logical detail, strategic planning and tactical finesse is necessary — or so most would agree. So McLuhan is saying something correct and important when he interprets historical processes as radically transformed in the age of electronic communication. So that old slogans and catch-cries do not grip with, say, hippies or New Left elements — or thinking people in the community generally — simply because objectively things are just not that simple any more. This truth is also reflected subjectively in the political consciousness of potentially vanguard elements. They want, no less than did the industrial working class a century ago, justice, equality, and the liquidation of all forms of privilege and exploitation. But they know, partly because of school and technical training and partly also because of their training as mass media consumers, that the most sincere, honest and impassioned repetition of progressive slogans suitable to a previous epoch is no substitute for realistic analysis and planning for progressive action.

Thus the increased flow of communication and information tends to project new possibilities for progressive social change and structural reform, to heighten the level of consciousness for resolution of social contradictions, to widen the scope of struggle for human freedom and dignity. It is true that McLuhan does not see all these implications of his theory, or does not choose to comment on them. His conception of history is not one of struggle at all, whether class struggle or otherwise, but rather that of a mere game, and indeed a game wherein oneupmanship repays the best dividends. But what is important is that those who wish to link consciousness with action should consider McLuhan’s concept of “implosion” more deeply in relation to the changing parameters and necessities of the class struggle today. “Implosion” almost certainly does introduce new contradictions of a fundamental kind in all societies, but the mere existence of these will not, as McLuhan seems to think, automatically bring into effective being re-tribalised society and integral man. It is necessary for progressive elements to organise new forms of action to take advantage of these “implosive” possibilities. As remarked earlier, to make effective use of McLuhan one has to stand him on his head first. For McLuhan accepts quite complacently the old subjectivist view that ideas make history. For a marxist, this must be McLuhan’s basic weakness, since ideas in fact do not and cannot make our history for us.

We must make it ourselves.