

## Marshall McLuhan Interview - 1996

**Wired:** *Do you still believe that the medium is the message?*

**McLuhan:** The real message of media today is ubiquity. It is no longer something we do, but something we are part of. It confronts us as if from the outside with all the sensory experience of the history of humanity. It is as if we have amputated not our ears or our eyes, but ourselves, and then established a total prosthesis - an automaton - in our place.

What happens when you see yourself outside yourself? It is disconcerting, like a hall of mirrors. A character in Dickens is a representation of a social role, but a modern movie actress who tries to play a role will seem old-fashioned. To cope with this, actresses have cooled themselves way down, become numb blanks. Thus today's stars are totally tranquilized. The smart thing for a girl nowadays is to play numb. Dumb actresses used to be in demand, now numb actresses are in demand. Rigor mortis is de rigueur.

Postindustrial man has a network identity, or a net-ID. The role is now a temporary shift of state produced by a combination of environmental factors, like in a neural network. This possibility has always been latent in the concept of role, but in the machine age this was perceived as a danger, while today it is simply a game - we no longer see shifting roles as dangerous and taboo and therefore theatrically compelling. Rather, we follow these shifts as if we were doing a puzzle or kibitzing a chess game. Yes, the medium is the message, but this does not mean and never meant that the content of the medium is a conscious reflection on itself. The medium is the message because it creates the audience most suited to it. Electronic media create an audience whose shifting moods are as impersonal as the weather.

*Do you watch much TV, and what do you watch when you do?*

The only good TV is live TV. I had three ideas for live TV shows. My first idea came back in the early '70s. It was called *Up Against the Wall*, and was almost produced. Contestants were to have explained to the audience how they got into a financial pickle. The more entangled their financial disaster, the more energetically the audience would applaud. At the end of every episode, a check would be issued to the most dismal contestant. This emphasis on misfortune would have been appreciated by advertisers, since they need a big dose of "bad news" in all programs in order to balance the "good news" in the ads. If TV actually were to broadcast more good news, as some cultural reactionaries want, the advertising market would collapse, and the ensuing economic crisis would probably lead to some sort of popular dictatorship, which they do not want.

I wanted to follow this up with a show called *Hey, Good Looking*. Similar in format to *Up Against the Wall*, it would have invited the viewing audience to share the suffering of ugly people. The ugly people would explain how they had been set back in life by their unattractive physical appearance. Then the home audience would vote by telephone for the ugliest contestant, who would receive plastic surgery for free. After the surgery, the contestant would come back and explain to the audience how his life had changed. The success of this show would have shown how important public displays of suffering are on television. This show too was never financed because of the sensibilities of network heads. But it was ahead of its time.

My other idea for a show was the most successful. I had an idea for a program that would break up the television screen into many individual segments. Any attempt to understand the show as a linear narrative would have been frustrated, and my audience would have had no choice but to accept the whole picture as a kind of music for the eye, which is what television actually is, though most people aren't aware of it. The theme for the show would have been "the movies," thus proving my theorem that the programs in a new medium are always revivals of an old medium.

I made this proposal to several friends, and it was finally picked up by the producers of The Hollywood Squares. If you watch the credits closely after the closing music, you will see my name. I enjoy this show very much, because it remains a sophisticated commentary on the nature of television.

By filling the space of the TV with a mosaic of close-ups, The Hollywood Squares hypnotizes its audience by paralyzing their senses and numbing their eyes to other distractions. The movie-world is literally chopped up into nine squares, each of which contains a close-up. The theme music is the ticktock of a hypnotist's watch. This is very clever and dangerous. Few people understand how The Hollywood Squares was the direct predecessor of MTV; the link is that The Hollywood Squares was the first show to comprehend my dictum that TV is music for the eye.

*So, what kind of TV show would you do today?*

I no longer want to create a TV show. TV should be watched, not made.

*Do you think privacy and anonymity are being eroded in the digital age?*

Don't be fooled by "anonymity." There is no such thing, since every node in a communication system must have an ID. Concerns about privacy and anonymity are outdated. Cypherpunks think they are rebels with a cause, but they are really sentimentalists.

In the '50s, men were crying about the "mass" man and spilling tears over too much anonymity. And they were right, or more right than the cypherpunks. Factories and corporations gave men roles, not souls. Industrial society was anonymous. Cities, factories, secret ballots with mechanical polling booths - that's anonymity. The Big Brother bogeyman of the machine age used technology to enforce anonymity and prevent anybody from doing his own thing.

The era of politics based on private identities, anonymous individuals, and independent citizens began with the French Revolution and Napoleon's armies (a product of the popular press) and ended with Hitler (the product of radio). The cypherpunks are still marching to the same martial music. You think private individuals and mass industrial society are opposites? They are part of the industrial configuration. Instantaneous electronic society gives everybody an identity - which we all want, and which we all also want to lose - while putting almost intolerable pressure on our sense of privacy.

Privacy disappears in the simultaneous stimulation of our patterns of thought.

*Then why do you send these messages via an anonymous remailer?*

I am not anonymous, but have simply changed my ID. Think of it as a brand. An old brand goes stale, or ends up controlled by a competitor, so you think up a new one. Wyndham Lewis taught me that the secret of success is secrecy, and I used to think he was joking. But

now I realize and am trying to demonstrate that these anonymous remailers are among the great publicity devices of all time. They provide a unique ID that is very glamorous and easy to distinguish from a common name. You change it at will, and it even incorporates the sacrificial element of naming and renders tabloid-type identity exposes unnecessary.

*What's your take on media juggernauts like Microsoft? Should it be allowed to stranglehold electronic media?*

We fear that the owners of the monopoly will crush us, but this never happens. In a flash, the monopolist's products appear out of date, and competition in that particular industry becomes irrelevant because the whole basis of moneymaking has shifted to a new area. As the pace of technological change speeds up, shifts in economic power increasingly seem like magical flipflops produced by luck. The old logic of monopoly - centralized stranglehold - no longer works. The attention of consumers can shift instantly and make the most profound investments obsolete in just a few years, soon to be sped up even further. We will see economic empires crash within hours, and new ones arise just as quickly. The task of the economic manager now is to try to hold monopolies in place just long enough for economic transactions to occur. The capitalist understands that to improve competition, he must encourage monopolies.

*What would you do about the inequality of the technological haves and have-nots?*

Equality is an industrial ideal, along with voting, time clocks, and the minimum wage. Machines promote equality; that is their downfall. The organic unity of pastoral times was replaced in the machine age with fragmented individuals, who could compete with each other. This unequal competition gave a foundation to the idea of equality. The industrial age transformed millions of rural farmers into mass workers and mass consumers. Only by transforming millions of rural farmers into a mass of workers and street riffraff could machines succeed in smearing the doctrine of equality around the world.

The hubbub now about equality is actually a nostalgia for machines. Our environment has been transformed into a single omnipresent network that embraces and encompasses individuals of unequal status. Machines - extended to their limit and transformed into a single omnipresent network environment - will flip into sacred and ritual environments. Recognized as an extension of ourselves and properly managed by a priestly class, technology inspires rituals, performed out of something like love. This development restores machines to their original totemic purpose. Whereas Marx recognized machines as "the dead hand" of the past, the electronic network could flip this totem (an amputated body part, you'll notice) into a shrine for ancestors.

Machines are gods not simply because they are powerful, but because they are the living embodiment of our ancestors. The Christian and the pagan worldview come together in an attitude of unconditional love of machines.

*Is the book dead?*

The book is not dead. When the book is finally freed from its aura of authority and its "soulfulness," it will return as a convenient interface. Just as the advent of printing created a market for medieval culture, the advent of the Net will build an audience for book authors. The body of the book, to misparaphrase a Frenchman, will be liberated from the soul of the book. In the age of electronic communication, invest in books. This is sound advice for people whose ears have replaced their eyes.

Sven Birkerts [author of *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*], an unintentionally funny writer, has been worrying that electronic networks might cause the popular audience for James Joyce to shrink. Last time I dropped by the Parma Barnes & Noble outlet (which recently replaced a musty store full of paperbacks, proving that books are a growth industry), I noticed that *Finnegans Wake* was selling just about as many copies as it always did.

*You were always fascinated by advertising. Do you think the Net will change advertising?*

Let me tell you about the economy of Parma, where I live. It has a secret economy, a mixture of software firms and natural-juice franchises whose factories are the unused rec rooms and converted triple-car garages of a suburban lifestyle that no longer holds interest. The juice franchises in Parma do not actually squeeze juice - this is handled remotely by friends and relatives of the franchisees, who strike deals with national distributors of organic produce. The franchise handles the marketing campaign: developing slogans, bottle designs, billboards, and TV commercials.

You see, the advertising is far more expensive and difficult than the juicing. This has been the case generally with advertising for several decades: by now it should be obvious that a product is merely an inducement to the consumer to purchase the advertising. The Net will only further this movement.

It is quite conceivable to me that a juice franchise could stop charging for its beverage altogether and simply give it away to people who pay to receive the advertising.

It would appear that instead of the advertising promoting the product, the product promotes the advertising. But that is not exactly right. Actually, the product promotes the consumer. The advertising gives the group of consumers its identity and *raison d'être*, and with a little bit of priming the group then begins to interact and entertain itself. The existence of the community of consumers gives other individuals (who are alerted by the advertising) an inducement to participate.

The anxiety of the outsider can be overcome by consuming the product, at which point he automatically becomes part of the community. I am quite certain the product could never be eliminated entirely, but, again, it could be given away for free to people who purchase the advertising.

*Would you consider doing something more extensive, perhaps in new media?*

I am open to business opportunities of the right sort. I never let the failures of my past life stop me from new failures. At the moment I am thinking of *The Dew-Line* newsletter. The problem with *The Dew-Line*, frankly, was that it was too much work, and though I was angry at Tony Schwartz at the time of its demise, I have since realized that it wasn't his fault.

Did you ever see the deck of cards we made? The idea was to create a modern tarot - not in the occult sense, but rather a series of puns and unrelated images that would spur sclerotic executives to creative thinking. Turn a card, and then describe how it relates to the current situation. I realize now that this was too far out. My favorite card was the one that showed a picture of a girlie with pasties over her breasts. The axiom on the card said, "Thanks for the mammaries." I really believe that if the execs had given it half a try, this card alone would have cured their ulcers. Today, we are just swimming in information.

It is a sort of lactic sea.

*In the emerging global village, isn't it imperialistic to expect everyone to have the same values (ours), obey the same laws (ours), and communicate in American English?*

America is no longer a global power - it's a global brand.

America as a brand stands for liberty, money, and sex. That three-way combo is hard to beat. Certain countries have successfully transformed themselves into brands already. Take France. Can you imagine a world without French wine, French cheese, French "culture" (a fuzzy amalgam of books, fashion, and accent), or French "romance" (mostly public displays of affection, kisses on crowded streets, et cetera)? France earns vast amounts of money from its Frenchness, which has little to do with France as a military or bureaucratic structure, except to the extent that the French state functions as an overgrown tourist bureau, which is increasingly the case.

America should take a lesson in global branding. To succeed as a brand, America should shrink its army, reduce its diplomatic corps, cut back its public participation in political meetings and summits. This will allow American products, from movies to soft drinks to computers, to become far, far more valuable and powerful.

*Is the Web hot or cool?*

The Web is cool. Cooler than television, which is much cooler than print. So much participation is required on the Web that no coherent, convincing, sharply defined characters can be created without slipping into comedy or conspiratorial paranoia. Conventional media, like Time magazine, have to get this right if they want to be successful. Zen Buddhism, which is very cool and flourished in the '50s when the spread of television created a need for people to cool down their personalities, will again be a growth industry in the late '90s.

Success in a cool medium takes one of two forms. You either are a moment of supreme wit - popular but transitory - or you become part of the landscape. To become a feature of the landscape is very difficult in a cool medium. Your brand must always be present in the back of the user's mind. Everything they see, no matter how unrelated, should give them "memories of you." Any moment of questioning or hesitation (and there will be many, since cool media require lots of participation and demand many choices) should call forth the suggestion, "Click here." To become part of the landscape in a cool medium, you must connect on a mythic level to the structure of the medium. Impossible? It works for Jesus, who is "always on my mind" as the Protestants say in their church and country music.

*Do you have your own webpage?*

No, I don't. I am practicing a discipline that leads to the next stage of media: the discipline of disappearance. The secret of success is secrecy. A program that calls forth active participation will always have a stronger impact in a cool medium. That's why gurus live on mountaintops, eh?

*What did you make of that media black hole, the O. J. trial?*

Marcia Clark asked the jury to follow drops of blood down the sidewalk, just like letters on a page, or like a sequence of dots or periods. But the jury was in the cool tactile world of television, where everything happens at once, not the hot world of print, where things follow logically, so they did not want to tack a sentence on at the end of the periods. A verdict of innocent is easier, cooler, than a verdict of guilty, because no proof is required to find

somebody innocent. They found O. J. not guilty, but they found the idea of proof very guilty. Nothing can be proved on TV. Of the five criminal trials that were popular over the last few years, only the one that was not on TV - Mike Tyson's - resulted in a conviction. All the other defendants were on TV and were not convicted.

*What would you say your contribution was to the business world?*

I was a business consultant. I used to do pretty well making speeches to executives and handing out tips to magazine types. Howard Gossage helped turn me on to that - "Save the world and fly first class" was his motto. But the business consulting business got very bad as the obsolete idea of efficiency failed to disappear. The worst thing for any organization is efficiency. You get moving very quickly, and you end up in the wrong place.

The key to business in the aural/tactile space of the 21st century will be inefficiency, where inefficiency means a multiplicity of inputs and outputs.

Tangents are key. The best businesses in the electronic age will be everywhere at once; i.e., they will be an essential part of the landscape. Their message will be vague but ubiquitous. Not discursive, but iconic and ironic. Only when there can be too many meanings and too many uses for a product will it succeed. If it works, it's obsolete, I used to say. But I heard a new slogan recently that appears to be perfect for this new economy: "Welcome to the future - it's broken."

This is not said in a tone of despair but in a bright, happy voice. Being broken is more productive. The difference between being productive and wasting time is disappearing, and we are returning to a preindustrial configuration. Businesses that imagine themselves to be efficiently pursuing their goals will wake up one day and find themselves utterly alone, profitless, and broke. This explains the current "merger mania." The idea of "synergy" is illusionary. What these huge companies are really after in combining is inefficiency.

That's why the Net is the premier invention of the digital era. It is not about finding anything. It is about superfluous connections and wasting time. As you know, only the young, the primitive, and the eccentric waste time. That is why all the most useful inventions come from them. They are not bound to be productive, and can thus waste time pursuing the unpromising to find the truly new.

The efficiency of the machine age cannot discover anything worthwhile now.

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