

Educational Effects of Mass Media of Communication

MARSHALL MCLUHAN

ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

FREUD commented on the insults heaped on man since the Renaissance. He suggested that all the discoveries made by man in recent centuries have automatically, as it were, become techniques of debunking. And he saw psychoanalysis in this light too, as meeting resistance because of its wound to human pride.

From one point of view it is possible to look at psychoanalysis as merely a recent by-product in a long series of cultural revolutions. One equivalent of psychoanalysis might be X-ray photography. Psychology without walls, on one hand; biology without walls, on the other. Going back to the ancient world for a moment, Patrick Geddes noted (Patrick Geddes in India, edited by J. Tyrwhitt, London, 1947, p. 29) that "Our western civilization is based on Greek civilization which was essentially composed of city states. The spread of Roman roads led to their conquest and exploited and exhausted all regions into the metropolitan maw. When the roads were broken down the regions and cities of the Middle Ages returned to a separate though interdependent way of life. . . ."

The Roman road, which represented a great improvement in the means of communication, knocked down the physical and cultural walls of ancient cities. But the road, in turn, was made feasible by writing and papyrus. Until written messages could easily and cheaply be committed to a light and transportable medium, the road appears not to have offered many attractions to the organizers of armies, states, and empires. This is a theme explored by the late Harold Innis, the economic historian of the fur trade, the railway, and the cod fisheries. When his explorations brought Innis to the subject of the pulp and paper industries, he found himself compelled to extend his researches to the trade routes of the mind and of public opinion, so that willy-nilly he became the pioneer of the social and political effects of the media of communication. His historical researches had assured him many times

that there cannot be any technological or physical change in the means of intercommunication that is unaccompanied by spectacular social change. A new medium is like the trumpet at the battle of Jericho.

Even a casual look at the media changes of recent centuries bears Innis out. Printing the Bible in the sixteenth century meant religion without walls. But unexpectedly it raised the towering walls of vernacular nationalism and individualism. For print upset corporate and liturgical worship. Although printing was the first mass medium, technologically considered, it isolated the reader and the student as never before. It shifted the stress in education and in the classroom from oral to written and visual instruction. Moreover, while print was the enemy of architecture, painting, and music (as these arts had been cultivated previously), it made possible the spread of information at least. Colonial America could not import plastic culture from Europe but it could print books and news.

By the time of the power press, in the early nineteenth century, the newspapers were rapidly changing the character of politics by creating public opinion. In a new country like America the new medium of the press created the first instance of a state founded on public opinion. English political forms, pre-dating the press, still depend much less on public opinion.

The accelerated collecting and speeding of news by the power press had, as is well known, a great effect on the development of roads and railways. But the advent of the telegraph seemed suddenly to reduce the globe to the proportions of a town. The telegraph is a device of instantaneity which knocks down all cultural walls. The telegraph produces that patchwork quilt of global cross section which we take for granted now on every page of the newspaper. As much as the Roman road, the telegraph was a remover of walls. And the natural consequence was diplomacy without walls.

Personally, I think that the effect of the telegraph has been, like that of later media, to break down also the division between our inner and outer worlds. The reader of the newspaper accepts the newspaper not so much as a highly artificial image having some correspondence to reality as he tends to accept it as reality itself. Perhaps the effect is for the media to substitute for reality just in the degree to which they become virtuosos of realistic detail.

The telegraph is not just an extension of print. It is not the mechanization of writing but the electrification of writing. That brings us to the movie, which was the mechanization of photography. The movie is another means of rolling up the mat of the external world in order to reveal it inside movie walls as a kind of night-dream of the day world. The movie is to the novel what the novel was to the newspaper. And just as news photography knocked down some of the vernacular walls which still foster the passions of nationalism, so the movie knocked down the walls of individualism created by print. It also attacked the walls partitioning our dreams from our waking lives, and made all times and places immediately present.

The order in which these changes occurred chronologically is not entirely their technological order of development.

Technically, the telegraph was far in advance of the movie or writing with moving images. And the telephone is in advance of the gramophone technically because the gramophone is merely the mechanization of speech and sound, whereas the telephone is the electrification of speech, as the telegraph was the electrification of writing. But with the telephone came speech without walls.

About the same time there arrived the motor car, the home without walls.

One classic principle can be seen operating clearly in all matters related to the development of the media of communication; namely, that while any given form is latent or incomplete in its expression, it manifests itself under its

opposite. With radio and TV we come to a striking illustration of this principle. The electronic or vacuum tube first manifested its powers in the acoustic sphere but did not achieve full expression until TV. Radio is to the ear what television is to the eye, the instantaneous record and transmission of sight and sound. Television takes a large step toward reassembling all the elements of interpersonal discourse which were split apart by writing and by all the intervening artificial media. For language itself is an acoustic medium which incorporates gesture and all the various combinations of sensuous experience in a single medium of sound. Writing was probably the greatest cultural revolution known to us, because it broke down the walls between sight and sound. Writing was a visualizing of the acoustic which split off or abstracted one aspect of speech, setting up a cultural disequilibrium of great violence. The dynamism of the Western World may well proceed from the dynamics of that disequilibrium. If so, our present stage of media development suggests the possibility of a new equilibrium.

Our craving today for balance and an end to ever-accelerating change may quite possibly be related to the very possibility of achieving that balance. But the obvious lesson of all this development for education seems to me both simple and startling. If our new media constitute so complete a range of expressiveness as both to enhance and almost to supplant speech itself, then we have moved into the period of post-literacy. If our present means of exploring and presenting the human past are such as to make simultaneously present all kinds of human pasts, then we have moved into the period of post-history. Not that we are to be deprived of books any more than of ancient manuscripts. But it is plain that our new culture is not going to lean very heavily on any one means of encoding experience or of representing reality. Already we are accustomed to a concert of the arts, of the sensuous channels and of the media. And in this respect we shall resemble preliterate and prehistoric societies in the inclusiveness of our awareness. That means also that we shall tend as they did toward homogeneity of experience and organization. Perhaps,

therefore, we have in our postliteracy come to the age of the classroom without walls.

It was very hard at first for the contemporaries of Erasmus to grasp that the printed book meant that the main channel of information and discipline was no longer the spoken word or the single language. Erasmus was the first to act on the awareness that part of the new revolution was going to be felt in the classroom. He decided to direct the revolution from the classroom. I think the same situation confronts us. We are already experiencing the discomfort and challenge of classrooms without walls, just as the modern painter has to modify his techniques in accordance with art reproduction and museums without walls. We can decide either to move into the new wall-less classroom in order to act upon our total environment or to look on it as the last dike holding back the media flood. Let us consider that the flow of information into the student mind (and our own as well) which was once oral, and then printed, could easily be controlled in the classroom. Today only a tiny trickle of the information flow into the student mind can be accounted for in the classroom. For every fact or attitude which the teacher can initiate or direct, the visual and auditory environment today provides many thousands.

In a word, the cultural content approach is futile, even granting that it is preferable. To try to defend our civilization against itself by either warning or encouraging the young about the surrounding chaos and vulgarity would be like the Eskimo trying to defend his culture against ours by taking a vow of silence. Our own history and our own methodology stand ready at hand to advise us in the present very dramatic climax. We must maximize rather than minimize the various features of our new media. It is easy now to see that they are not mere vehicles for already achieved experience and insight. We have moved far beyond mechanization. Let us not lose ourselves by supposing that we have merely to contend with new forms of mechanization. Radio and TV are not new ways of handling manuscript- and book-culture. The motor car was not a substitute for the horse. It did what the horse could never do. Radio and TV are not audio-visual aids to enhance or to popularize previous

forms of experience. They are new languages. We must first master and then teach these new languages in all their minute particularity and riches. In so doing we have available on an unprecedented scale the resources of comparison and contrast. We can compare the same play or novel or poem or newsstory as it is changed artistically in passing into the movie form, the stage, the radio, and TV. We can note the precise qualities of each medium as we would compare the various degrees of effectiveness of a thought in Greek or French or English. That is what the young are doing sloppily and helplessly outside the classroom every day. This holds their attention as the classroom does not.

In the electronic age, as the media begin to dwarf nature, nature imitates art more and more. Oscar Wilde records his amazement at finding London drawing-rooms overflowing with long-necked, pale, auburn-haired women, where before the paintings of Rossetti and Burne-Jones, such women had never been seen. Today that imitation is normal. Every movie and every issue of Vogue breezily sets out to revamp not only our clothes but our physiology. Such is the amount of power available now that the boundaries between art and nature have disappeared. Art has substituted for nature, and various new political regimes tend to act on these assumptions.

In such an age with such resources, the walls of the classroom disappear if only because everybody outside the classroom is consciously engaged in national and international educational campaigns. Education today is totalitarian because there is no corner of the globe or of inner experience which we are not eager to subject to scrutiny and processing. So that if the old-style educator feels that he lives in an ungrateful world, he can also consider that never before was education so much a part of commerce and politics. Perhaps it is not that the educator has been shouldered aside by men of action so much as that he has been swamped by high-powered imitators. If education has now become the basic investment and activity of the electronic age, then the classroom educator can recover his role only by enlarging it beyond anything it ever was in any previous

culture. We cannot hope simply to retain our old prerogatives. Our bridges are gone and the Rubicon is yet to cross.

Yes, we must substitute an interest in the media for the previous interest in subjects. This is the logical answer to the fact that the media have substituted themselves for the

older world. Even if we should wish to recover that older world we can do so only by an intensive study of the ways in which the media have swallowed it. And no matter how many walls have fallen, the citadel of individual consciousness has not fallen nor is it likely to fall. For it is not accessible to the mass media.