

The Communications Revolution

Ohio State University 1960

Panelists: Marshall McLuhan, Edgar Dale and Keith Tyler

Moderator: Gilbert Seldes

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Seldes

On one side we're all trying to find out what is the nature of the new communications, what is the special nature of each one of the media such as moving picture or broadcasting, what is the nature of all of them – all of the mass media as we call them put together – and I think that from that, almost everybody feels their insides are stopping, deciding what is the essence. We're not prejudiced: I think we all want to say what do all the media do to us, and then I put my own specialty in – What do we do about them? And I don't think I differ too much from you, Mr. McLuhan.

McLuhan

No, I've learned a great deal from your own work, Mr. Seldes, and you were in this field before any of us. And we've toiled along in your footsteps, as it were.

Seldes

All right. You share, however, I'm pretty sure, enthusiasm for someone else. There's Harold Innis, the Canadian economist. Don't you think that he phrased the essence – really, the revolution in (you probably know the actual words that he used) – the connection between an enormous change in the means of communication and the change following in society?

McLuhan

His notion is that any change in handling information [or] communication is bound to cause a great readjustment of all the social patterns, the educational patterns, the sources and conditions of po-

litical power, public opinion patterns. But, he got into that track rather interestingly: you see as an economic historian he had been studying railways and the cod fisheries, the fur trade and pulp and paper, and ... he moved then from staples as forms of shaping economic life to media as staples, and he began to study the new media as really basic economic resources, and much as, for example, cotton in the south has shaped a whole culture, now radio is shaping a global culture – it's global in the extent of its resource availability. So, what would appear to be in the offing is a global culture conformable to a staple like radio, just as the southern culture was conformable to cotton.

Seldes

Then he went on ... the simple example that after print came in, the whole feudal system broke. And what I'm worried about, and he didn't live long enough to predict any of this, is what is going to break, where is the shift of power going to be in present time?

McLuhan

The tremendous developments that we made in individual private habits of study – isolated effort in a direction and so on – these are likely to take the rap from media that are so inclusive of the whole of society and at all of what all levels. Think of the tremendous shift in political power that is going on at this moment through the use of television in politics. And McCarthy folded in a week after he went on television; ... if Huey Long had gone on the TV, he would have been a flop at once. TV will not take a sharp character, a hot character – it's a cool medium, and our politics are being cooled off to the point of rigor mortis, according to ...

Seldes

Why not?

McLuhan

The nature of this medium which calls for so much participation does not give you a completed package, a completed image – you have to make your image as you go. Therefore, if the person who comes in front of the TV camera is already a very complete and classifiable type of person – a politician, a highly obvious doctor type, lawyer type – the medium rejects him because there's nothing left for the audience to view or to complete, and they say this guy's a phony, there's something wrong with this guy.

Tyler I'd like to have you react to this notion that, since the founding of our country, we have the balance of power progressively go from a very small group that we're voting ... and have property rights and so on, [and] gradually spread to a larger and larger group. Now, how does television fit into this? We have practically universal television as far as it being in the homes. Does this mean that the power more and more is flowing really to the popular group?

McLuhan Yes, literally, the participation of the whole population in the political process becomes very deep. And whereas it's no longer a question of assessing arguments, platforms, regional clashes, and so on – everybody is with it. All age groups. Yes, the issues are no longer given to you on single planes and single platters – they are total.

Tyler But this is a very good point about being deep. Is this actually a kind of a pseudo event? I mean ...

McLuhan No.

Tyler ... you think you are with reality, but really you are having prepared for you on television, those aspects they want you to see which give you a feeling of participation ...

McLuhan ... the audience is making a new form of association among its own members – they are making a new reality, a new art form.

Seldes You don't think we're learning more things superficially?

McLuhan No.

Seldes You don't?

McLuhan No, this is an age in which the new criticism or psychology or anything else ... the word used in all these forms is depth. Reading in depth, psychology in depth, everything now is in depth.

Seldes These are the ... relatively few experts and outsiders –

McLuhan No, no, no, no.

Seldes Your implication now is, it seems, to be the opposite of what you were saying a few minutes ago. I'm not trying to trap you, Marshall, I'm trying to find out. Now, at one point, it's my feeling that the thing we need to be troubled about by these mass media is their creation of the non-individualistic person, the man who is with it so he's with what everyone's doing – to use what is now a hackneyed word, the conformed person. On the other side you are saying, however, television can be used to convey information in depth, the implication being it can actually be used to make people think.

McLuhan The forms of entertainment that work best on television, whether it's Paddy Chayefsky or the Parr Show, are ones which admit of a great deal of casualness – in which people can be introduced and dialogued with in the presence of the camera, at all sorts of levels of their lives. You can capture them at all sorts of strange and offbeat moments of their existence. And this kind of probing and peeling off the superficial aspects of people, and so on, is normal to this medium. It is a depth medium. The movie medium is, by comparison, very much a photographic, packaged medium, which gives you a very highly defined and a very slick complete package.

Tyler You know, McLuhan, you might do what I've known you to do, which is to characterize the former period as the print period, and the present period as the electronic period, and kind of point out what sharp distinctions you ...

McLuhan Well, I think people who are subjected to the arrangement of lan-

guage visually in lines, highly sequential and precisely rigid, develop habits of arranging their lives, arranging their whole social existence, which are very closely geared to these forms. They're not especially aware of this. Linearity, though, is not characteristic of radio or television or movies. And so we have been subjected to tremendous new forces, new influences which have broken up the older habits acquired from the print world.

I think it's a good time ... to bring up a point that when any new form comes into the foreground of things, we naturally look at it through the old stereotypes. We can't help that. This is normal, and we're still trying to see how our previous forms of political and educational patterns will persist under television. We're just trying to fit the old things into the new form, instead of asking what the new form is going to do to all the assumptions we had before.