Tribes of the Internet Age

JULIAN PIGOTT

Ryukoku University. pigott@world.ryukoku.ac.jp

ABSTRACT

Marshall McLuhan's provocative aphorism, *the medium is the message*, declares that content is less consequential than the technology through which it is mediated. A great deal of content in the social space is regurgitated from history in superficially new forms, impermanent and soon forgotten (who cares about yesterday's newspaper?). But technologies shape human consciousness, association, and action in radically original ways. According to McLuhan, the development of mass communication technologies in the 20th century marked the beginning of a new tribal age. Contemporary observers bemoaning the corrosive effect of social media on print journalism, or hedge fund managers squeezed from short positions by a viral movement started by an anonymous Reddit poster may well agree with McLuhan. But the implications of McLuhan's ideas run much deeper than they realize: in fact, the joke is on *them*. This paper characterizes contemporary political discourse as a battle between two tribes, the *new wave* and the *old guard*. The new wave is fluent in new communication media, adept at exploiting the affordances they offer for original forms of understanding, expression, and action. It uses irreverent content—memes, trolling, humor, parody, shock tactics—manipulation, and networking, to bewilder and frustrate its luddite opponent. Members of the old guard, by contrast, understand new technology *only in terms of the old*. They see themselves as defenders of order against chaos, protectors of the gilded age of the printed word, and they demand respect. To the new wave this performance is little more than an amateur costume drama played out as simple-minded *semanticism*, 'fact checking' (and worse) of opponents, and appeals to authority. It is a parody of what used to be possible in a Newtonian, reductionist world of linear cause and effect, by people they deem unfit to lick the old masters' boots. An accelerating loss of faith in the ability of the old-guard elite to understand and administer the modern world has generated a desire for strong leadership guided by passion, the transcendent, and shared values—in other words a style of leadership characteristic of tribal societies.

Keywords: Political discourse; tribalism; Marshall McLuhan

Key concepts: figure/ground; spatial association; ages of the media; laws of the media

> The medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7).

McLuhan understood the relationship between communication technology and its content through the Gestalt psychology concepts *ground* and *figure*. Print-age man tends to focus on a visually or rhetorically arresting central figure (message)—the "juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 18)—while ignoring the ground (medium). This allows him to navigate everyday life in a logical manner, attending to the most salient matters, and spares him the trouble of making sense of the hidden mechanisms shaping society. In an unchanging world we are as oblivious to the implications of technology as a fish is of water until it is hauled from it, gasping for oxygen. However, times of technological transformation provoke a "wide-eyed awareness in the user, creating a moment of revelation as old and new come into juxtaposition" (Gow, 2011, p. 22), inviting us to look beneath the surface.

McLuhan argued that media manipulate the ratio of our senses, and with it our perception of the world, in different ways. Media operating in the *visual space* transmit information in a *sequential*, *linear* and *connected* fashion. The visual space is one of detachment, the scientific method, and scholarly or citational erudition (Zingrone & McLuhan, 1997). Acoustic space, meanwhile, transmits information instantaneously and simultaneously, setting up "fields of relations which have an auditory character" (McLuhan, 1957, p. 5) (see Table 1).

Visual		Acoustic
Figure	<--->	Ground
civilized	<--->	tribal
eye	<--->	ear
individual	<--->	group
sequential	<--->	simultaneous
static	<--->	dynamic
linear	<--->	non-linear
figure	<--->	ground
specialism	<--->	holism
send/receive	<--->	network
mechanical	<--->	electrical

Table 1: Two types of spatial association (Adapted from Gow, 2001, p. 75)

Books and Newtonian physics are visual, McLuhan writes, while newspapers and particle physics are acoustic. Modern physics abandoned the specialized visual space of Descartes and Newton, reentering "the subtle auditory space of the non-literate world" (McLuhan, 1962, p. 22). Newspapers are magical institutions whose purpose is to "keep us in a state of perpetual emotion" and to provide us not insights into events, but "merely the thrill of the event." People do not read newspapers, they "step into them like a warm bath" (McLuhan, 1960, p. 21). The Internet combines all previous modalities and adds more besides, but writ large it is an immersive, acoustic amalgamation of media modalities. Even the written text on the Internet is often speech-like, used for instantaneous interaction in a colloquial manner (Levinson, 2001). It is also hypertextual, incorporating comments and links that lead the participant to other opinions and sources of information. The linearity of language is broken, and the overall effect is associative rather than systematic. Each subsequent piece of information installs itself as an addition to the broader, total view (Doherty, 2014).

> Alphabet and print technology biased the sense ratio towards the visual as in *Euclidean space*: linear, flat, straight, uniform, full of connections…As electric media come into play the sense ratio becomes biased to *acoustic space*…a structure whose centre is everywhere and whose margin is nowhere. Visual space permits the idea of closure and acoustic space does not…The world of acoustic space is an arena of rapid interaction where everything is related to everything (Bélanger, 2011, p. 9)

According to McLuhan's historical framework, this new acoustic world hearkens back to an earlier, prehistoric *tribal era*, in which communication was local, immediate, and spontaneous. For the elite, this era came to an end with the invention of the phonetic alphabet in approximately 3000BC. In this *manuscript era*, language became visible for the first time. Communication became increasingly systematic, linear, and asynchronous. Texts could be read repeatedly in private, fostering independent thought. The consequences of the manuscript era included chiefdoms growing into empires, the development of large-scale agriculture and trade, the entrenchment of literate hierarchies, and the development of organized religions with standardized texts (Martin, 2019). The arrival of the *print era* in the 15th century invited increasing numbers of the public into the visual space. The decline of Latin and the growth of vernacular publications made possible national consciousness, the nation state, and nationalism (McLuhan, 1964). Monumental contributions to our understanding of the world by figures such as Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, and Newton were contingent on the culture of reductionism and specialization made possible by the invention of the printing press. This was the age of the great man with the orderly mind, the tidy desk, and the filing system. But this man at the same time was losing touch with simultaneous modes of awareness and observation (McLuhan, in Zingrane & McLuhan, 1997).

The most recent communication revolution followed the invention of the telegraph in the 19th century. The *electric era* converted the reading public into a mass audience, one that involved everybody in everybody else (McLuhan, 1965). Millions of people sitting in front of the television, were absorbing the modern equivalent of shamanistic lore from authoritative sources in a manner analogous to the tribal systems of tyrannous instruction and control (Zingrane & McLuhan, 19974). Thus, at the end of the 20th century we found ourselves at a juncture similar to that of the Greeks upon the invention of the phonetic alphabet:

> The revival of oral culture in our own electronic age now exists in a similar fecund relation with the still powerful written and visual culture…The Greeks went from oral to written…as we are moving from written to oral. They 'ended' in a desert of classified data even as we could now 'end' in a new tribal encyclopedia of auditory incantation (McLuhan, 1969).

The Internet propels us further into acoustic space, towards McLuhan's global village, in which a significant number of people view themselves primarily as members of ideological tribes, dispersed over the Internet, rather than as members of socio-economic classes or nationalities. McLuhan's global village is far from the version taught to school children (environmentally sustainable peace, love and harmony), or the utilitarian Neoliberal vision of free markets and expertise building a better world by dragging the poor into the middle class; it is a place where people get too close, impatient, and savage, a place of arduous interfaces and abrasive situations (McLuhan, 1977). As usual when a new medium swallows an old one, conventional taste protests that vulgarization is occurring (McLuhan, 1964). The pseudo-anonymity of social media, for example, frees members from traditional politeness norms, leading to the expression of extreme sentiments and disparagement of the identities and views of those across the partisan divide (Conover et al, 2011). The virtual and the real world come into conflict because representation rather than sincerity is what counts in online discourse. A journalist can extoll science to generate likes on Twitter while having little knowledge of it; an Internet troll can reap havoc on an online forum while being perfectly polite to his flesh and blood peers. The Internet is making politicians out of an unprecedented number of people, but those belonging to the new wave do not play by the established conventions. They are not trained in the techniques used by professional politicians to negotiate the political swamp by sticking to talking points, flattering the egos of journalists, keeping their private and public positions apart, and adhering to relatively civil discourse norms. For their part, members of the old guard are unwilling to abide by the unwritten rules of the early Internet, most important of all to *never feed the trolls*.

Fighting as a tribe can be enormous fun, yet there is something about the rise of the virtual identity in conjunction with the fading of more traditional social institutions that leaves behind a yearning for former senses of belonging, since human nature does not change—or, if it does, it changes more slowly than technology. McLuhan feared that such crises of identity could lead to "the collective nervous breakdowns of whole societies" (McLuhan, 1969).

McLuhan argued that the best way to study the nature of any new medium is to study its effects on the old "in the manner of Perseus looking in the mirror at Medusa" (McLuhan, 1965). A new medium is not merely an addition to an old one, since it never leaves the old one in peace. It constantly oppresses the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them (McLuhan, 1964). All media, he claimed, have four effects: Amplification, obsolescence, retrieval, and reversal. Television, for example, *enhances* shared experience while *obsolescing* detached, individual contemplation, the radio, and kids playing outside; it *retrieves* tribal consciousness; and it *reverses* into parental neglect. A sample of the influences that the Internet has on political behavior, discourse and related phenomena are listed below. Some of these—the proximity of political opinions, the degradation of traditional norms relating to discourse, and changes in social identity—have already been addressed. Those highlighted in bold are given a more detailed analysis in the proceeding section.

What forms of political discourse does the Internet enhance, intensify, make possible or accelerate?
- Immediacy of political discourse and the temptation to participate
- Proximity to the political ideologies of others
- Speed of the news cycle
- Emphasis on spectacle over investigative journalism
- **Access to political information**
- **Emphasis on pragmatic content[1]**

What forms of political discourse are pushed aside, or obsolesced?
- Established norms of public decorum
- Established social identities
- **Distinction between the private and public sphere.**
- **Emphasis on semantic content**

What recurrence or retrieval of earlier forms of political discourse are brought into play?
- Tribalism; the tribal leader
- Oral culture; appreciation for rhetoric and polemic over detailed objective analyses.
- The long-form political interview/discussion.

When pushed to the limits of its potential, what forms of political discourse does the Internet flip into?
- Outrage culture; deplatforming
- New forms of propaganda and behavioral control
- State surveillance
- Slacktivism, or empty advocacy

Case study: The crisis of journalism

The print age emphasized semantic meaning over pragmatic meaning. Broadly speaking, thinkers of early and late modernity were expected to put down in writing clearly, and explicitly, the entirety of their message. This expectation is still with us: Semantic-heavy content is considered weighty and factual while content that relies more on pragmatic understanding—hyperbole, rhetoric, memes, humor, parody, ridicule and the like—is viewed as a light-weight distraction. But the visual space in which the old guard purport to operate is under assault by technology operating in acoustic space. Arising from the friction between these two spaces is the

---

[1] "It's cold in here" can be understood semantically as an evaluation of room temperature, or pragmatically as a request to for the addressee to close the window.

doubling down of the old guard news media into a sort of faux-visual modality—the costume drama referred to in the abstract—whereby semantic accuracy is worn as a badge of honor. 'Faux,' because true objectivity requires the sincere attempt to represent an increasingly acoustic world *as it is*, whereas the current fashion is merely to remove pragmatic meaning from reporting as and when it suits the interests of one's tribe. Consider the following headline from CBS: "Trump says he thinks 3.4% Corona virus death rate is a 'false number'"[2] (Watson, 2020). Similar headlines appeared in many contemporary articles. They constitute an accusation that Trump was daring to *defy the experts*. Trump's statement was in fact perfectly orthodox: Since many people infected by the Corona virus are asymptomatic and untested, the death rate is probably lower than reported. He was guilty of no more than 'Trump-speak,' and the headlines were therefore deliberately misleading, despite, at a puerile level, being semantically accurate.

The recent journalistic obsession with fact checking speaks to a desperate obsession with *truth as it used to be,* performed unwittingly as parody. This is what is needed, we are told, to counter the new wave which (since they do not understand it) they presume to be completely detached from truth. The new wave is in fact enjoying itself, freed from the bounds of strict semantic accuracy. The troll, for example, may use a slur to provoke a reaction, rather than to present sincerely held beliefs. This, however, leaves him vulnerable to the old guard, who will apply its own petty semanticism against its enemy through accusations that such activity constitutes prima facie evidence of hate speech or 'misinformation' (recently the term 'disinformation' has been making the rounds). 'It was just a joke' does not fly as a defence to the humorless, because pedantic semanticism disregards pragmatic meaning as and when it wishes. This works both ways: An innocuous headline, *Women's world march to be largest assembly of people with disabilities in US history* (Clarke-Billings, 2017), is the subject of mirth to those who question the sanity of people who would wear pink, knitted vagina hats in public—humor is a much more stinging rebuttal than an editorial and ideally suited for viral distribution via memes.

A more precise definition of these two tribes can now be attempted. The first, the *old guard*, presents itself as defenders of the print age ethos. It believes (or believes that it believes, or pretends to believe) that "logical clarity and narrative sequence are always the index of solid meaning" (Zingrane & McLuhan, 1997, p. 10), and demands that government policy be based on the guidance of qualified specialists—the sine qua non, as they see it, of visual space. It finds uncertainty, chance, incompleteness, and unintended consequences troubling, since they are not easily categorized or modelled. It is ill at ease in an Internet environment in which truth is probed at impressionistically rather than following a logical path from start to finish. It is concerned about fake news and post-truth. Its slogan might be "Facts! Science! Experts!" The second tribe, the *new wave*, doubts the old guard's ability to understand and administer a complex, interconnected world, and rates its diagnoses and predictions about society about as highly as those of fortune tellers. It embraces more enthusiastically the rich confusion of acoustic space; it recognizes that facts can be manipulated and distorted by those who deliver them; it prefers common sense to expertise; and it is temperamentally more sympathetic to McLuhan's view that every age, the print age included, contains within it its own biases. McLuhan, a deeply erudite man of literature, cautioned against making a cult of the scientific mind, and argued that its boasted detachment at times may not amount to very much "besides not choosing to link the significance of one part of its actions to other parts" (McLuhan, 1951, p.108). Following Erasmus and More, who believed rationality required a unified ratio among the senses. McLuhan argued that a richer form of common sense involved "translating one kind of experience of one sense into all other senses and presenting that result as a unified image of the mind" (McLuhan, 1989, p. 25). The slogan of the new wave might be: "*Embrace the chaos!*"

Access to information, the everyman, and the decline of the expert

Journalism largely consists in saying 'Lord Jones is dead' to people who never knew Lord Jones was alive.
G. K. Chesterton

---

[2] Empirical examples are drawn from the mainstream media's coverage of Donald Trump simply because they are so abundant. The media is congenitally unable to report on Trump honestly, even when doing so would be damning enough. Despite being nearly eighty years old, Trump is a living embodiment of the acoustic era, and thus the ideal subject for the media costume drama.

What are some of the concrete characteristics of the Internet that threaten the old guard and lead to tribal behavior? Let us deal here with the old guard's chief weapon, the mainstream media. The most obvious problem the Internet poses to the media is the way it democratizes access to information, since this undermines the media's gatekeeping role of reporting information to the public. The Internet makes it easier than ever before to identify spin, partisanship, double standards, hypocrisy, or downright lies. A typical example comes in the form of the following headlines concerning comments Trump made at a rally on February 28, 2020:

> CNBC: *Trump calls outbreak a 'hoax,'...*(Clinch, Kopecki & Kemp, 2020)
> POLITICO: *Trump rallies his base to treat coronavirus as a 'hoax'* (Cook & Choi, 2020)
> WASHINGTON POST columnist Dana Milbank: *Remember this moment: Trump, in South Carolina, just called the coronavirus a 'hoax.'* (Dana Milbank, Twitter)
> MEDIA MATTERS: *Fox & Friends agrees with Trump that coronavirus is a "hoax"* (Media Matters, 2020)

The excerpt from the rally 'summarized' by these headlines, streamed live and subsequently made publicly available on Youtube, reads as follows:

> *We have exposed the far left's corruption and defeated their sinister schemes and let's see what happens in the coming months...Let's watch. Let's just watch. Very dishonest people. Now the Democrats are politicizing the Coronavirus, you know that right? Coronavirus, they're politicizing it...They tried anything...They tried it over and over. They'd been doing it since you got in. It's all turning. They lost. It's all turning. Think of it. Think of it. And* <u>*this is their new hoax*</u> (The Telegraph, 2020).

Clearly the implication that Trump was denying the existence of the Corona virus is a disingenuous smear. Rightly or wrongly, Trump was accusing the Democrats of *politicizing the crisis* in the same way that (he claims) they attempted to remove him from power through politically motivated investigations that by this time he was regularly referring to as the Russia Hoax. To the viewer who watches both the source material and reads the media summaries of it, time and time again the conclusion is clear: *The media is lying to me*. This leads to the degradation of discourse between those who view established media as an increasingly subversive political class with far too much power, and those either maintain faith in the mainstream media, despite its faults, as an important institution, or those who rely on it without recourse to source material. If any proof is needed that we live in an acoustic era, it is that for many people this is irrelevant—the beliefs that Trump thinks the virus is a hoax (and that white supremacists are 'good people') are widely held, evidence be damned. They are best understood as tribal beliefs.

Another consequence of universal access to information is that the public gets to see the less-than-gratifying spectacle of journalists in action. As McCarthy (2020b) notes, almost every question at a presidential press conference in the Trump era was an attack intended to hurt the president: "They ask for speculation, then attack him for speculating. Each one of them wants to catch him in a mistake so the clip of their question will go viral." Writing in the Atlantic, James Fallows (2020) accompanied by other outlets (MSNBC, the Boston Globe, the Nation, Daily Kos) argued that the public's access to presidential conferences should be curtailed:

> ...given the rising falsehood quotient in what Trump says, and his determination to cut off or divert questioners...cable networks should stop airing these as live spectacles and instead report, afterwards, with clips of things Trump and others said, and whether they were true...In time of crisis, cable-news channels are making the public less informed, and thus increasing public danger, by providing such a convenient platform for lies.

As members of the old guard, media organizations believe that the public needs them to represent and interpret events rather than being allowed to make up its own mind. Unsurprisingly, much of the public feels differently. A recent Gallup poll (McCarthy, 2020a) found that trust in the media's handling of the COVID19 crisis was 19 points lower than Trump's, scoring lowest of nine institutions rated. Polls such as these suggest that the mistrust of the press is bipartisan rather than limited to a single side of the political divide.

The row over Trump's use of Twitter which ultimately led to his banning from the platform can be understood as a conflict between those who wish to translate Trump into visual form for their own purposes

rather than allowing him to interface with the public through 'un-presidential' acoustic communication. Trump, despite his age, is part of the new wave. For years he used New York tabloids, and reality TV to manipulate his public image, and Twitter could almost have been tailor made for him. But printed text was not tailor made for many journalists born in the electric era. They are to the visual space what Don Quixote was to chivalry, minus the lovable innocence. Where Quixote, driven by romantic nostalgia, invented Giants from windmills, the media, driven by far more self-serving and mercenary aims, invents scandals through which they hope to deceive the public into believing that they act purely in their interest.

A second disruptive characteristic of the Internet is to cause private sphere values to infuse the public sphere (Ruotsalainen & Heinonen, 2015), eating away at the right of privacy and the sanctity of the individual (McLuhan, 1969). In the television era, the public began to view politicians not as a separate social class, but as people with homes and families *just like us* (Meyrowitz, 1985). Politicians began to perform for the cameras in a more informal manner befitting the *everyman*. The everyman is a familiar, everyday presence, not a hidden ruler, more a tribal chieftain than a politician (McLuhan, 1969). The press has always collaborated with politicians they view favorably to bolster their image. Many were unaware until after FDR's death that he was wheelchair-bound, and the media were willing to cover up JFK's numerous sexual escapades with White house staffers and movie stars. By the time of Bill Clinton their hand was forced, and in the Internet age nothing is off limits, particularly for its enemies. The change in the press's treatment of politicians is generally ascribed to changing cultural mores, but the nature of communications media, if McLuhan is correct, constitutes a more fundamental driver. The kind of explicit image control of the past is inconceivable in the Internet age, and if it is attempted, it can be easily uncovered and ridiculed.

The denigration of the powerful is not limited to politicians and journalists. Academics and celebrities all find themselves *brought down to size* by the Internet. Virtually everyone in the public eye can now be condemned for some past indiscretion. One particularly alarming manifestation of the dissolution between private and social life is the targeting of people for stating purportedly offensive opinions (i.e. anything not meeting the political correctness norms du jour) a decade or more ago, before such statements were thought to be politically incorrect. The 'rational' old guard views this situation as unsavory but necessary (although it makes them uneasy—the witch hunt inevitably bites them)—more truth is always good; their opponents are more likely to believe in the necessary myth of the greatness of leaders—their leaders, at least—or at least to be more accepting of the compartmentalization of private and public life, past and current beliefs, and the inevitable hypocrisy of the human animal. The acoustic space, unlike the visual space, does not require one to get tied in knots in the face of complexity. The problem is not that the media shows peoples' flaws and vices, but the delight they take in the act of denigration as political partisans. In the past, the costs of tearing down a leader might have been measured against the loss of trust this causes in government, and the opportunity cost of what they could be covering instead. But in tribal warfare in the information age these considerations fly out the window. The modern mainstream media appears to exhibit little consideration of the damage their actions can cause through political polarization, instead acting in the immediate interests of their tribe while pleading commitment to truth-telling.

> *If you believe the doctors, nothing is wholesome; if you believe the theologians, nothing is innocent; if you believe the soldiers, nothing is safe. They all require to have their strong wind diluted by a very large admixture of commonsense.*
> Lord Salisbury, letter to Lord Lytton, 15 June 1877.

Finally, it is worth considering the position taken by the two tribes towards experts,[3] and the ongoing Corona virus provides a timely opportunity to do so. On one side, we have the "trust in science" position of the old guard; on the other an instinctive mistrust of a class that has been involved in the mistakes as well as the successes of political governance. The genuine expert is someone who is knowledgeable about a particular area,

---

[3] A particular class of experts, not including the experts that *always get things done* (engineers, plumbers, carpenters etc.). First, social scientists, including financial forecasters, political scientists, risk experts, and economists. Taleb (2010) writes that they 'serve as experts while offering the scientific reliability of astrologers. ' Second, experts from the hard(er) sciences— epidemiologists are a topical example—when their work is applied to the complexities of the social world. I have addressed this issue elsewhere (Pigott, 2018).

but the credentialled expert class of today, swollen by academic inflation, exhibits an alarming obliviousness to the fact that it is as incapable as it ever was of predicting the future of today's complex societies (and besides, how is one supposed to get likes and reTweets by Tweeting "I don't know"?). Research reported in the Lancet (Stuckler et al., 2011) estimated that half a million people died of cancer as an economic consequence of the 2008 crisis. What, then, might be the future consequences of the far more severe, current economic lock-down? What if the virus comes in mutated form and public immunity is too low? The specialist avoids including opportunity costs and unintended consequences in his models, because doing so would make writing papers and speaking authoritatively difficult. To be clear, this addresses a particular class of experts including stockbrokers, psychiatrists, 'intelligence' analysts, and political 'scientists,' financial forecasters, risk experts, and epidemiologists. Together they form a class of experts who include many characterized by Taleb (2018) as the *Intellectual-yet-idiot*. As Davies puts it:

> …the status of facts in public debate rises too high. We place expectations on statistics and expert testimony that strains them to breaking point. Rather than sit coolly outside the fray of political argument, facts are now one of the main rhetorical weapons within it (Davies, 2016).

In an acoustic world, common sense can trump expertise. Consider the use of surgical masks to stem the flow of the COVID-19 virus.[4] It is not immediately obvious why wearing a mask would do anybody harm. Medical professionals wear them, presumably with good reason. Slow motion videos of people sneezing with, and sans mask shows the difference (MHLW, 2009). In that case why not encourage people to wear them *just in case*, as a mass exercise of trial and error? It takes an expert-led technocracy to insist first upon producing numerous articles debating the issue while waiting for the results of large-scale control studies (which are inevitably disputed) in order to give the cautious go-ahead. The view on masks has now flipped completely, but the 'science-based' narrative behind it is unconvincing to many. Hence we are in the ridiculous situation whereby members of the new wave are more likely to oppose their use—but again, this is tribal warfare. The utility of specialists in solving society-wide issues declines with complexity. In a sensibly-scaled society, one that is reasonably self-sufficient, one in which citizens and companies have a couple of months-worth of savings set aside in case of emergency, for example, it would be much safer and wiser to turn over policy to the epidemiologists for a month to tackle the most pressing problem of the moment. But in a fragile, interdependent world, these very same experts can become ideologues playing an oversized, and possibly damaging role in decision-making. Wisdom based on an understanding of civilization and history matters too, but to an old guard clinging to a pastiche of the print age, statistics and flow charts are preferable to hard thinking. Besides, when things go wrong, events can be blamed by political leaders on the experts to whom they abrogated their responsibility to lead (plenty more are waiting to take their place). The ideal new wave leader instead listens to a variety of experts, but also to wise non-experts. He examines his own experience and instincts, adds a dose of common sense, thinks hard about the opportunity costs of a given policy, promotes a vision, throws up a prayer, Tweets about it, and *leads*. Leadership in the acoustic space is art, not science. The acoustic age sees a shift from politicians as expert leaders to politicians as celebrity tribal chiefs. Their fame and status rather than their academic credentials set them apart. The expertise rests in the hands of hidden bureaucrats and the journalists who, being of the old guard, view their right to evaluate and judge the performance of the leaders as their God-given right.

In closing

McLuhan was resented by many intellectuals because he heralded their obsolescence just as they were being touted by the wider culture as the salvation of mankind (Zingrane & McLuhan, 1997). His claim that technology is leading society into a tribal age may ring true to both the old guard and new wave, but they will likely understand it differently, the former with foreboding, the latter with guarded optimism. The new wave has a natural edge in the Internet age, because their ideas speak to those who have found themselves outside the more tightly controlled polite political space of traditional media platforms. But the old guard still has the

---

[4] At the time of writing public, media, and political opinion was resolutely against mask use. This has now been airbrushed from history as related by the old guard.

greater institutional power which it uses to pressure new media to do its bidding. Should the new wave gain power, the future is uncertain. Should the old-guard retain it (for now), we are faced with new technological forms of oppression that will be used against the new wave.

Despite the power of McLuhan's ideas, it would be irresponsible to view media technology alone as determining the evolution of society. Nothing inherent in the media technology of the 20th century determined that global capitalism must take the form of an supranational empire that supersedes democratic institutions intended to protect individual freedoms, that governments should be allowed to use this technology to surveil, censor and exploit those they rule (Ruotsalainen & Heinonen, 2015), or that corporations such as Facebook and Twitter should be in the position to determine truth, and to stifle political expression (Wintour, 2020). The use of McLuhanism by fundamentalists to claim that absolutely *everything* is determined by technology would be as unhelpful as the use of Marx, Freud, or the Frankfurt school to claim that everything can be understood in terms of class, sex, or power.

McLuhan's response to accusations of technological determinism, the idea that technologies are the fundamental antecedents of societal conditions and change, is somewhat contradictory. When pressed in interviews McLuhan clearly sided with the ancients (Zingrone & McLuhan, 1997, p. 2). He viewed the TV era with "total personal dislike and dissatisfaction," admitting that "No one could be less enthusiastic about these radical changes than myself." (McLuhan, 1969, p. 34). He reportedly implored his daughter not to let her children watch TV, and stated that "The utmost purity of mind is no defense against bacteria…to resist TV, therefore, one must acquire the antidote of related media like print." (1964, p. 35). In his written work, however, he generally goes only so far as to emphasize the importance of *awareness*. If we pay attention, he argued (one suspects he never expected anyone to pay attention), then nothing is inevitable (McLuhan, 1967). At other times he was more pessimistic still:

> Even if I opposed them or thought them disastrous, I couldn't stop them, so why waste my time lamenting? … I see no possibility of a world-wide Luddite rebellion that will smash all machinery to bits, so we might as well sit back and see what is happening and what will happen to us in a cybernetic world. Resenting a new technology will not halt its progress. (McLuhan, 1969).

The irony of McLuhan (who was of course aware of this irony) is that he worked in academia, wrote books, and was himself very much a product of the print age. But there is a reason that his most famous apothegm is *The media is the message!* and not something along the lines of: *A technological modality may, in the long-term, prove to be more influential than the accumulated content transmitted by this mode.* The former is TV-friendly, it gets people thinking, it confuses them, it inspires debate, it punches one in the gut. It provokes the systematic academic who likes things laid out in exhaustive detail from start to finish. Behind it lies not statistics, computer modeling, or a reliance on experts, but deep erudition, insight, and historical understanding. It is a "return to poetic form…extremely appropriate to the all-at-onceness of electric process" (Zingrane & McLuhan, 1997, p. 4). McLuhan's work consisted of probes and broad categories that left much unsaid, leaving to the audience the responsibility of grappling with the implications of his ideas. It is manifestly *new wave*. As Zingrane and McLuhan (1997) put it:

> McLuhan's best thought speaks to us in the language of metaphor. In a scientific and logical universe, this makes him suspect: not only do many of his tenets lie beyond present scientific scrutiny; like any voice that speaks primarily in metaphor, McLuhan lends himself to subjective rather than "objective" understanding (p. 272).

Zingrane and McLuhan[5] (1997) noted two decades ago that McLuhan's reputation had been in a hiatus, waiting for electronic reality to catch up. In 2021 his wisdom is sorely missed.

---

5 Eric McLuhan, Marshall McLuhan's son.

References

Bélanger, M. (2011). *Marshall McLuhan and the future of work in a world of information*. The McLuhan 100 conference, University of Toronto, April 1, 2011. http://www.marcbelanger.ca/future-work.pdf

Clarke-Billings, L. (2017). *Women's march to be largest assembly of people with disabilities in U.S. history*. Newsweek. Accessed from: https://www.newsweek.com/womens-march-be-largest-assembly-people-disabilities-us-history-545096

Clinch, M., Kopecki, D., Kemp, T. (2020). *Trump calls outbreak a 'hoax,' South Korea has record jump in cases*. CNBC. Accessed from: https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/28/coronavirus-latest-updates-china-hubei.html

Conover, M. D., Ratkiewicz, j., Francisco, M., Gonc alves, B. Flammini, A., Menczer, F. (2011). *Political polarization on Twitter*. Proceedings of the Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media.

Cook, N., Choi, M. (2020). *Trump rallies his base to treat coronavirus as a 'hoax'*. Politico. Accessed from: https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/28/trump-south-carolina-rally-coronavirus-118269

Cortez, S. (2019). *Trump didn't call neo-Nazis 'fine people.' Here's proof.* Realclearpolitics.com. Accessed from: https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2019/03/21/trump_didnt_call_neo-nazis_fine_people_heres_proof_139815.html#!

Davies, W. (2016). *The age of post truth politics*. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/campaign-stops/the-age-of-post-truth-politics.html

Doherty S (2014) *Hypertext and journalism*. Digit Journal 2(2): 124–139 http://www.philosophy.ru/library/eco/internet.html (date of the reference 2.12.10).

Fallows, J. (2020). *Reporter's notebook*. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2020/03/2020-time-capsule-6-press-conference/608431/

Gow, G. (2001). *Spatial metaphor in the work of Marshall McLuhan*. Canadian Journal of Communication, vol. 26, 63-536.

Gow, G. (2011). *Marshall McLuhan and the end of the world as we know it*. ESC 36.2-3. pp. 19-23.

Levinson P (2001) *Digital McLuhan. A guide to the information millennium*. NY: Routledge.

Martin, M. (2019). *How the long history of human violence explains why the Internet causes so much chaos*. Time.com. https://time.com/5673224/violence-history/

McCarthy, J. (2020a). *Gallup poll: Coronavirus response: Hospitals rated best, news media worst*. https://news.gallup.com/poll/300680/coronavirus-response-hospitals-rated-best-news-media worst.aspx

McCarthy, P. (2020b). *The unbearable pettiness of the Washington press corps. American Thinker.* https://www.americanthinker.com/blog/2020/03/the_unbearable_pettiness_of_the_washington_press_corps.html

McLuhan, M. (1957). *The effect of the printed book on language in the 16th entury*. Explorations 7, 100-108. Reprinted in E. McLuhan and W. T. Gordon (Eds.), *Marshall McLuhan Unbound* (2). Corte Madera (California): Gingko Press.

McLuhan, M. (1951). *The mechanical bride*. Berkley, CS: Ginko Press.

McLuhan, M. (1960). *The medium is the message*. Forum (Houston), 19-24. Reprinted in E. McLuhan and W. T. Gordon (Eds.), *Marshall McLuhan Unbound* (17). Corte Madera (California): Gingko Press.

McLuhan, M. (1962). *The Gutenberg galaxy:* The making of typographic man. 1st ed.: University of Toronto Press.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media*. NY: Routledge.

McLuhan, M. (1965). *Address at Vision '65*. Downloaded from http://www.mcluhanonmaui.com/2011/06/address-at-vision-65-by-marshall.html

McLuhan, M. (1967). *Now the medium is the massage*. New York Times, 19 March 1967.

McLuhan, M. (1969). *The Playboy interview: Marshall McLuhan*. Playboy Magazine. Accessed from: https://web.cs.ucdavis.edu/~rogaway/classes/188/spring07/mcluhan.pdf

McLuhan, M. (1977). *City as classroom: Understanding language and the medi*a. With Kathryn Hutchon and Eric McLuhan. Agincourt, Ontario: The Book Society of Canada.

McLuhan, M. (1989). *The global village: Transformations in world life and media in the 21st century*. Oxford: OUP

Media Matters Staff (2020). *Fox & Friends agrees with Trump that coronavirus is a "hoax"*. Media Matters. Accessed from: Fox & Friends agrees with Trump that coronavirus is a "hoax"

Meyrowitz J (1985) *No sense of place. The impact of electronic media on social behavior*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

MHLW (2009). マスク着用の重要性（インフルエンザをうつさないために）
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Mkb4TMT_Cc

Milbank, D. (2020). *Remember this moment: Trump, in South Carolina, just called the coronavirus a "hoax."*
https://twitter.com/Milbank/status/1233555987149312000

Pigott, J. (2018). *Staying sane in an era of information overload: How heuristics can be used to fight the expert problem*. ASR: CMU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Special on Heterodoxy in Global Studies (2018) Vol.5 No.2.

Ruotsalainen, J., Heinonen, S. (2015). *Media ecology and the future ecosystemic society*. Eur J Futures Res (2015) 3: 9.

Stuckler D., Basu, S., Suhrcke, M., Coutts, A., McKee, M. (2011). *Effects of the 2008 recession on health: a first look at European data.* Lancet. 2011; 378: 124-125

Taleb, N. N. (2010). *The IMF and our increased dependence on faux-experts. Huffington Post.* Retrieved from https://www. huffingtonpost.com/nassim-nicholas-taleb/the-imf-and-our-increased_ b_347488.html

Taleb, N. N. (2018). *Skin in the game: Hidden asymmetries in daily life*. NY: Random House. Wintour, P. (2020).

Wintour, P. (2020). *Mark Zuckerberg: Facebook must accept some state regulation*. The Guardian. February 15, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/feb/15/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-must-accept-some-state-regulation.

The Telegraph. (2020). *Trump: Coronavirus is Democrats' 'new hoax'.*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5TZ6fTYrsE

Watson, K. (2020). *Trump says he thinks 3.4% Corona virus death rate is a 'false number'.* CBS. Accessed from: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-says-he-thinks-3-4-coronavirus-death-rate-is-a-false-number/

Zingrone, F., McLuhan, E. (1997). *Preface*. McLuhan, E., Zingrone, F. (eds.) *Essential McLuhan*. London: Routledge.