

# McLuhan and Media in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

**2011** marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of media visionary Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan and his work are known to students, scholars and practitioners of journalism and media alike the world over, whether they know his name or not. I recently asked my teen-age daughters, who lived with my wife and me during my visiting professorship in Hong Kong in 2001, if they recognized the name, Marshall McLuhan, and they immediately said, no, they did not. But when I asked, had they ever heard the expression, *the medium is the message*, *the Global Village*, or *hot and cold media*, they quickly acknowledged they had. When I told them these were expressions introduced by McLuhan they became animated and engaged in his ideas.

McLuhan's insights and observations about media and society remain as relevant as ever. Perhaps they are even more relevant. A 2011 study by Prof. Clement So, Director of the School of Journalism and Communication in the Chinese University of Hong Kong, shows that citations in refereed journals of McLuhan's work have actually increased and increased significantly in the past decade, particularly with the rise of social media. This is despite the fact McLuhan has been dead for more than three decades and his major works were published in the 1960s and 1970s. In 2010 there has been a spike in the number of citations of McLuhan's work in leading refereed journals. This is across a wide spectrum of fields, from communication to physics.

## **The Global Village**

Recent events across the world confirm the relevance of McLuhan's ideas. Witness what has been called the Arab Spring. The citizen-lead revolution in North Africa and the Middle East was fueled largely by social media and mobile media, as well as the transparency of communication via the Internet. Google executive Wael Ghonim's Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/WaelGhonim>) played arguably a central role in the public movement against President Mubarak in Egypt. In Tunisia, there seems little doubt that the Wikileaks-released cable describing the opulence of now former president Ben Ali's lifestyle played a key part in bringing him down. These media helped citizens to organize protest movements and political change in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere. Broadcast media, especially television, as well as Internet and mobile media, reported news of these social movements in real time to the world. McLuhan's notion of

the Global Village is clearly still as relevant as ever. So is his observation that the media act as extensions of our senses.

McLuhan's probes continue to prompt thought and reaction. Perhaps the medium is the message, or the message, as least at times. Why else would so many authoritarian (or even democratically elected) governments seek to restrict citizen access to and use of the Internet, social media and mobile media, especially during times of crisis, even when doing so stirs even greater social upheaval?

## **The Fifth Estate**

The influence of technological change on journalism, media and society travels well beyond mere technological determinism. While technological change may be the engine that drives change in journalism and the media, it certainly does not pre-determine the outcome. It may enable change, but entrepreneurs and innovators have considerable room to develop alternative models for success or failure in the marketplace. The business landscape is rife with failed news and media ventures from the online arena to prove this point...but Google, Facebook and Twitter point the way to success as well. The question is whether journalistic success stories will emerge in the digital near-term, as well.

An intriguing new book by Columbia's Bill Grueskin et al. *The Story So Far* summarizes research and other findings to date on the business of digital journalism in the 21st century, at least in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> A few glimmers of hope are beginning to emerge. Other research from around the world is beginning to round out the picture. William H. Dutton, director of the Oxford Internet Institute, has conducted research that suggests networked individuals are becoming what he calls "the fifth estate."<sup>2</sup> Much as the news media have historically acted as a fourth estate, or check on the three estates or branches of government, the public, enabled by mobile and social media, can now act independently as a citizen-based news reporting check on government. Moreover, research conducted in Moscow, Russia shows that traditional media have hard time competing with social media on breaking news in terms of speed.<sup>3</sup> The news of the killing of terrorist and leader of Al Qaeda Osama Bin Laden broke first on Twitter, 20 minutes before it was reported on traditional news media, including television news, and even before it was announced officially by U.S. President Barack Obama. There are simply too many citizen journalists

1 Grueskin, Bill, Ana Seave and Lucas Graves. *The Story So Far*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2011.

2 Dutton, W.H. (2009) *The Fifth Estate Emerging through the Network of Networks*. *Prometheus* 27 (1) 1-15.

3 Zassoursky, Ivan, "Social Media and Reporting the News in Moscow." Paper presented at Digital Media Conference at Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia, Nov. 13, 2010.



gathering news and distributing it with their mobile devices and other Internet-enabled digital media for traditional news media to match their work force. Of course, these citizen journalists can also get the facts wrong, and as a result, rely on the self-correcting mechanisms of the Internet and social media, as well.

Consequently, traditional news media need to adapt to this hyper-competitive digital news environment and provide an alternative approach to news gathering and sense making that citizen journalists cannot. Investigative reporting is one arena. Computational journalism and media is another. This is the convergence of journalism, media and computer science. It can take the form of computer-assisted reporting, mobile augmented reality, interactive maps, news games, and other data-driven news.

### ***The Medium is the Message***

Social media and mobile media will be central to understanding the role of media in political processes and social change. The use of the Twitter # hashtag in the title of this article is not by accident. It is offered as a McLuhanesque probe to suggest that social media are the message, or at least part of the message in the 21st century's global village.

Consider these words from Thomas Cooper, Professor of Media and Visual Arts, Emerson College, Boston, and a former student of Marshall McLuhan. "Just as Freud thought the unconscious authored historical cause, and Marx thought economics to be the "prime domino", McLuhan substituted the implements of communication as the axis upon which the earth turns. As a leading portmantologist - that is a high quality inventor of new words and phrases, McLuhan was not content to state that "the medium is the message", but felt compelled to also tell us that "**the medium is the message**", the "**medium is the mess-age**", and the "**medium is the mass-age.**" Much of his prophecy has come true and the rest has proven thought-provoking. I lift my glass with you on the 100th anniversary of his birth to the Sage of Aquarius, the oracle of medium hot and cool, and a founding father of our burgeoning field, Marshall McLuhan."

In June of 2011 I was in Shanghai, and I used my iPhone Twitter, YouTube, Facebook Apps to post to a global community. Within minutes I received responses from around the world. In the words of McLuhan, social media and mobile

media are the message.

Yet, television and radio are still the message, too! And personal viewing and listening and satellite radio are the message, at least in the U.S. With 20m+ paying subscribers in U.S., satellite radio is an extremely popular premium service. Digital television is the dominant news medium in U.S., with more than 60% of U.S. households still relying on TV as their primary news medium. Although the Internet and mobile news sources have surpassed newspapers and radio in popularity, especially among the young.

E-readers are also the message. As these Forrester e-reader data (2007-2009, est. 2010-12) show, nearly 70 million persons in the U.S. have e-readers in the U.S. in 2011.<sup>4</sup> The numbers are double worldwide, and are growing dramatically. This installed base presents dramatic opportunities for news and media entrepreneurs, not only in the e-book marketplace but in digital news and beyond. Devices such as the iPad and the Kindle have emerged as transformative in a variety of ways. From an innovation perspective, the iPad and Android mobile platforms have provided media entrepreneurs an avenue for developing new media products and prototypes at very low cost and risk. Consequently, dozens of intriguing news and media trials have emerged in the U.S. and around the world. From interactive, multi-media and on-demand news to augmented reality, free mobile apps such as NYTimes, iBooks, Aurasma, HBO GO are enabling citizens world-wide to engage in media via their mobile devices anytime and anywhere.

More than a decade ago I outlined a three-stage model of online journalism.<sup>5</sup> In the first stage, news media repurposed their online content from traditional media. In the second stage, many news organizations produced original content for online delivery but still designed it using traditional media storytelling models. In the third stage, increasingly widespread in 2011, many news organizations now create original journalism for online or mobile digital devices that is designed to utilize the storytelling capabilities of new media. In this stage, there is the potential to help develop an informed citizenry, one that can provide the foundation of an effective and engaged democracy.

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4 [http://www.forrester.com/rb/Research/research\\_ereader\\_forecast\\_2010\\_to\\_2015\\_us/q/id/57199/t/2](http://www.forrester.com/rb/Research/research_ereader_forecast_2010_to_2015_us/q/id/57199/t/2)

5 Pavlik, John V., "The Future of Online Journalism: Bonanza or Black Hole?" Columbia Journalism Review, July/August 1997: 30-34, 36.