

MONKEYS ON BICYCLES AND TELETATS TOO:

Prognostications from an Introduction to Media course using a Marshall McLuhan inspiration.

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Presented 11/6/2011 at the McLuhan 100 Then/Now/Next Conference, Toronto

This paper synthesizes the end-of-semester prognostications developed over several semesters by students, goaded by their instructor, in the Introduction to Media course at the University of Missouri at Kansas City. Contending with *Understanding Media* alongside a much more conventional Introductory text, participants have distilled some consistent observations regarding beings and their tools, the convergence of McLuhan with science fiction forecasting, and the most likely direction of telecommunications technology (where we will literally "wear all mankind as our skin" - McLuhan 1964). This is all quite speculative, but the uniformity in certain speculations over several semesters about what our technology will ultimately be required to retrieve from our past is interesting.

Introductory media survey courses typically regard their topic in terms of their histories, industry practices, and controversies (e.g.: Rodman). McLuhan's *Understanding Media* was added several years ago to cover the fourth perspective of media philosophy, which is usually more engaging for the many Juniors and Seniors who enroll in this Sophomore-level course, inexplicably, out of sequence. Being half a century old, *Understanding Media*'s many then-contemporary, culturally relevant references used for illustration (Jack Paar?) are lost to time, and to my students. Conversely, the same passage of time has made McLuhan's prescient premonitions and prognostications today our everyday reality, and consequently readily comprehensible. This is quite a turnaround from the 1970's challenge of understanding McLuhan. The tetrads in particular are easily understood, appreciated, and handled by this generation of media savvy students.

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The Tetrads and the Amish

A key objective behind reintroducing McLuhan to our students is to share his “strategy for survival”. Consumer mindlessness is now widely recognized, as is the speciousness and ephemera of social media. But actual proactive critical engagement with the media environment, along with possible informed choices regarding adoption/non-adoption, is still elusive. It’s not enough to hail McLuhan as another Nostradamus, the original and still the only true media guru. What real survival utility has been bestowed? Did McLuhan succeed in his mission to save our collective linear consciousness or resist technological assimilation?

It is the consensus of most students that McLuhan’s message has not made its mark in the community for which it was composed and disseminated. The juggernaut media industries continue to disseminate their uncritical consumer-consciousness agenda (to paraphrase their analyses). Are we all still numb to the message of the medium?

Curiously, McLuhan never said much, if anything, about the Amish, the Mennonites, or other cultural groups who, on their own terms, do ask the four big questions (tetrads) about the consequences of adopting any technology. The Amish have used telephones since the 1910s (Umble) and FAX machines since the 1990s, but very conditionally. These cautious adoptions echo the tetrads, not so much in their conciseness, but in an astute awareness of technology being the agency of both intended and unintended social revolution and disruption.

As is typical of the Amish, when a new technology comes along, the Amish examine its effect on the church and community. The technology should not be an intrusion into the home, but rather serve the social purposes and goals of the group. In a sense, the Amish "re-organize" the technology. (Igou)

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Additional information about the Amish approach to technology can be gleaned from <http://www.amish.net/faq.asp>, a website maintained on the behalf of, but not by, Amish communities at large by “the English”. But for those of us who are born into our media environment and must prosper within our media environment on its terms, what recourse is there? McLuhan said if we can understand the effects and affects of the media environment we then can know how to “turn off the buttons” and “program a strategy of evasion”. But what are the consequences of turning off our life-support connection with this environment?

Contemplating the Monkey

Several weeks before the final debriefing of McLuhan, students are asked to consider this image:



Also a YouTube clip is viewed: www.collegehumor.com/video/2996315/monkey-bicycle After contemplating the situations of monkeys who ride bicycles we discuss the following three questions:

Why does the Monkey ride the bicycle?

Is the Monkey Happy?

Is the Monkey a “self-actualized” monkey?

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It is consistently concluded that the monkey rides the bicycle because it is trained with reinforcements to do so. Its needs for food, sleep, security, socialization, etc. are the rewards and goals that result from learning this behavior and performing it as demanded. It's a job.

There is controversy regarding the monkey's happiness divided across the "zoos are cruel" and "pets are fun" crowds. The YouTube clip in particular suggests that monkeys can indeed enjoy the enhancement of motion provided by the technology they have been required to learn.

The consensus regarding "self-actualization" takes some discussion, both to define "self-actualization" and to debate its importance. The final consensus is that the monkey does not live according to its true "monkey nature". Food, sleep, security, socialization, etc. are all needs and desires the monkey has the inborn and inherited capacities to obtain entirely on its own. These skills and attributes are unexercised in captivity, and monkeys in these situations are akin to humans in nursing homes. Their lives are maintained, but not lived. Undomesticated animals are on life-support only when in captivity and suffer the deprivation of natural self-actualizing behavior.

Contemplating the Human

This image is displayed next and for the first time in the final class session:



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The same three questions are now discussed as they relate to the human:

Why does the Human ride the bicycle?

Is the Human Happy?

Is the Human a “self-actualized” human?

No debate about why the human rides the bicycle, for it is an extension of his feet and enhances his ability to travel quickly and efficiently. It’s also good exercise. There is a clear reward for this learned behavior.

No debate about the Human being happy riding the bicycle. After all, we built this thing ourselves and no one (apparently) has forced us to use it.

Debate about whether or not the Human is a “self-actualized” human typically takes awhile to muddle through. Is human behavior Nature or Nurture? Is it Human Nature to create technology and so become fused with technology? This question is directly related to the anecdote regarding Tzu-Gung as recounted by McLuhan in *Challenge and Collapse*, the last chapter assigned for reading in *Understanding Media*. Is true “self-actualized” Human Nature that which has been shaped for many thousands of years of human evolutionary, in responsive design through integration with an essentially non-technological natural environment? Or is Human Nature as changeable as the next OS upgrade? Is Human Nature an app?

McLuhan and Science Fiction

We have all been abducted by aliens. We have been teleported out of the Earth and enclosed in an artificial environment of unnatural shapes, textures, sights and sounds, none of which interface with our naturally formed senses and autonomic responses. We didn’t notice this because we are the aliens.

This is one of the higher themes of science fiction. Sci-fi isn’t just about dogfights in space (with sounds effects) and giant crawling eyes that want our

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women. Classic sci-fi thought is legitimate philosophy about what happens to Human Nature when new or artificial elements are introduced. What if days and nights were six months long? Can artificial satellites be placed in orbit to relay live television (Arthur C. Clark)? What if machines developed situational ethics (Asimov)? Can a software program and interface simulation equal the experience of reality (Matrix)? What if the long-suppressed natural-but-predatory impulses of a highly civilized cultural were accidentally manifested physically through technology (Forbidden Planet)? What if the use of any technology by humans inevitably reshaped human physiology, psychology, and spirituality (McLuhan)? How will those consequences play out?

Tattooed Technology: Wearing all mankind as our skin

No one really wants to be a Borg (the half organic-half hardware cyborgs from Star Trek: The Next Generation). Aside from the dicey fashion statement, the invasive and biologically destructive nature of implanted technology is a high-risk surgical process.

This image is of the character Kai from the TV series LEXX and is shown for comment in this class session:



LEXX was a particularly absurd Canadian-German sci-fi co-production that often veered towards the tacky and lewd, but even this odd product had a moment or two of prophetic insight. It is quickly noted by students that the small tattoo on Kai's cheek resembles a microphone stalk. Within the *LEXX* universe it is indeed a communications device, but not one clumsily dangling off the body and instead integrated

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within the surface of the skin. This is an ironic artifact in *LEXX* because Kai had once used it to link with his fellow Brunnen-G, but for over a thousand years his race has been extinct and this technology now links him to no one. It is as vestigial as an appendix. But as a portent of future body-technology solutions it has been worth comment and debate.

Bodily integrated yet non- invasive. Tattoos have been a communications technology for thousands of years, denoting status as a prisoner or a warrior, slave or ruler, and as expression of class-consciousness and personal identity. Activating tattoos through flattened circuitry is the next step. Interconnection between circuitry and neural pathways is already in experimental development. But for ease of integration, we don't want to hijack existing pathways but grow new ones. Culturing replacement cells for "spare parts" is underway now, but eventually the growing of invented parts designed for subcutaneous technology interface will be on the agenda. No need for awkward "internet contact lenses" that can be dislodged and lost or irritating ear-buds. Users will need to learn to access these new data feeds arriving in their brains via new neural pathways. We can't remember that as newborns we could not see more than light and shadow, even though our data collecting eyes were complete and doing their job effectively. As we had to learn to see with our eyes, so we will need training in how to switch feeds at will and see and hear data from our teletats.

No longer will your iPhone be losable or steal-able. Your iSkin will be with you at all times. And of course it will not only graphically portray traditional dragons and flowers and the like but also flash the corporate logos that today are screened only on clothing. All will know you have the latest version of iSkin by the brand you display in your skin. Yet one more level of extension of personality,

Large expanses of subcutaneous technology will make for effective antenna structures to send and receive data, to intake broadcast power, and provide

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sufficient collection area for solar power. But the best power source (as long as we're growing new kinds of body components such as neural pathways) will be a new organ that generates electricity. If it's so simple an eel can do it, why not us? The virtue here is that we will be "off the grid" and consuming food rather than coal or uranium to generate personal technology power. It will be an attractive weight-loss program (watch more-lose more) with the only danger being the possibility of starvation due to under-eating combined with overuse of media.

Who would submit to an introduction of such bizarre organics into their natural bodies? Certainly those whose bodies are failing them in some respect would be open to these intrusions for medical interventions and monitoring. Annual visits to the doctor provide a very poor sampling rate for assessing health when compared to the 24/7 data reporting possible through teletats. On-board medications could be administered in accurate response to actual monitored need, avoiding both over and under medicating. Medical applications are the frontier of integrated subcutaneous communications technology. Paranoid parents might welcome a tracking technology bonded to their children's bodies. How far behind will mere entertainment and ease of personal communication be?

With direct neural data delivery, all the sensory cortexes in the brain can receive programming. Along with vision and sound, taste, smell, and touch can be included to allow a complete environmental immersion. The "iSkin teletat" technology forecast provokes both enthusiastic appreciation and skeptical abhorrence among students.

Accommodating the Mr. Hyde of Human Nature through Technology

What to do with Mr. Hyde? Probably the most challenging tetrad to apply to a technology is "what will be retrieved from the past?" There is much latent human behavior and stimulus response that was appropriate, even essential, in the

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past but which is now unacceptable and suppressed. Captive monkeys undergo stress under behavioral suppression and obsolescence. Perhaps humans suffer this as well? The popularity of action-risk video games may have much to do with the retrieval and exercising of emotional responses and behaviors that have forever laid in wait like Robert Louis Stevenson's Mr. Hyde. Hyde has usually been understood to be the "evil" part of human nature, but perhaps this morally based censure is in aid of greatest denial rather than understanding.

Does it really work so well for denied aspects of primal human nature to be ignored and suppressed, so often unsuccessfully and sometimes with terrible and damaging outbursts harmful to many? Virtual technology begins to offer simulation environments where we can "go back to nature", a prospect McLuhan envisioned in *The Gadget Lover*. It may soon be more important in an engineering proposal for a new technology to ask not "what will be enhanced?" but "what have we lost that can be retrieved?" Perhaps we can retrieve the Earth from which we have abducted ourselves and once again play in the Garden of Eden.



All technologies fail (reverse) when they reach their point of full deployment and maximum saturation.

All new technologies work best when introduced into an environment in which they are not yet present.

All new technologies are solutions for situations and environments they are not yet a part of.
All new technologies fail to solve their own introduction.