

THE INTERNET, THE "LAWS OF MEDIA" AND IDENTITY POLITICS

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Can the "laws of media" described in Marshall McLuhan's posthumously published writings (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988, McLuhan and Powers 1989) help us understand the effects of the Internet and the new real-time technologies on culture and society? Perhaps the overambitiously phrased and deterministic laws of media can contribute to the creation of distinctions between different kinds of effects; if so, it can be worthwhile to try them out. So far in the public debate on the Internet, contributors tend to argue, simplistically, either that the Internet and related technologies are necessary conditions for true democracy or that they entail the end of democracy; that they obliterate hierarchies or strengthen them; and that they either homogenise or heterogenise people - render them more similar or more different. All points of view may be true, but they apply to different social fields, and at the end of the day, they are wrongly phrased. McLuhan's model can be a starting-point (although it needs supplementing) for a more accurate reflection on these issues.

There are four "laws of media", which are therefore often referred to, in applied contexts, as tetrads. Any medium, from this point of view, (i) extends or intensifies something, (ii) renders something obsolete, (iii) retrieves or brings back something, and (iv) transcends itself or "flips into" something new. Regarding recent technological innovations, it may thus be said, for example, that the CD-ROM (i) intensifies multimedia presentation as a form, (ii) renders printed encyclopedias obsolete, (iii) retrieves the archive as a

relevant source of information (most popular non-game CD-ROMs are archives), and (iv) eventually flips into some version of the World Wide Web, given greater bandwidth. The LP record, in its time, (i) intensified cultural diversification in the 20th century, (ii) rendered live concerts obsolete (partly), (iii) retrieved or revitalised Bildung or a classic bourgeois education, and (iv) flipped into tapes and CDs. The aeroplane, again, (i) intensified the (already growing) rate and amount of human movement, (ii) rendered the steamboat and the Zeppelin obsolete, (iii) retrieved Enlightenment ideals (from the claws of Romanticism), and (iv) may flip into virtual travelling (including video conferences etc.).

While all the above is questionable and certainly merits to be treated in greater detail, the application of McLuhan's tetrad indicates the necessity to distinguish between different kinds of effects of technologies at the sociocultural level.

Regarding the Internet, it may be said, for example, that a society with the Internet

- intensifies the development of new class divisions (the haves and the have-nots in the information maze),
- renders classic territorially-based democracy obsolete, since the Net is non-territorial and geographically unbounded,
- retrieves the intellectual as an important figure (the Web communicator, interpreter and developer of information filters for the majority of the population), as well as anarchism (since the Net is non-hierarchical) and fundamentalism (as counterreactions against the chaotic surplus of information on the Net), and
- flips into anarchy/decentralised democracy or surveillance society: the technology itself provides possibilities for both options.

Even if this way of distinguishing between kinds of effects of the new information technologies gives a more nuanced view than what is common, it is still necessary with a few further distinctions. For example like this:

At a technological level, the Internet

- intensifies nonterritorial information flow
- renders obsolete letters, magazines; eventually TV and air travel?
- retrieves text-based information, and
- flips into truly interactive real-time multimedia.

At a social level, the Internet

- intensifies the erosion of boundaries (along with migration and the strengthening of supra-national political entities)
- renders obsolete the national public spheres
- retrieves sub-national levels of social integration, and
- flips into locally bounded, albeit nonterritorial worlds.

At a cultural level, the Internet

- intensifies the replacement of logical, linear structures with "paradigmatic", nonlinear ones (and as such it is congruent with rave and techno)
- renders obsolete the "syntagmatic model" of cultural worlds, which depicts them as tradition-bound, rooted in the past, internally coherent and bounded
- retrieves "pre-typographic man", the full human intellect liberated from the strictures of the book, and
- flips into a holistic, nonlinear and nonscientific form of rationality.

From the point of view of the specific effects of the new technologies, the question cannot, therefore, be whether the Internet is a threat to democracy or its saviour. The period we are living through is, for better or for worse, a period of transition leading not to a North American led "new world order" or

to Ragnarok but to a qualitatively new kind of politics. If our normative measuring-rod is traditional, territorial, polity-based politics from the Greek *polis* onwards, then the future seems bleak since it is going to be different from that model. Look at it this way:

Globalisation is taking place in all the major public spheres in the planet.

- The economy is becoming increasingly globalised. Computer programmers in Bangalore working for Silicon Valley companies are no longer a curious anomaly, nor are industrial businesses moving to tropical countries to escape from trade unions, taxes and environmental groups. This is the present.

- Politics is being globalised, both in the sense that political issues worldwide are comparable (no country is, for example, completely unaffected by either Marx' theory of the social classes or by neo-liberalism or nationalism), and in the sense that important political issues are being perceived as globally relevant -- from Norwegian whaling to nuclear fallouts and large-scale violence in the Middle East.

- Culture is being globalised through increased communication, modernisation, travelling, Baywatching, MTV consumption, education and the establishment of English as the world's second language.

At the same time, as anthropologists have been saying for years now, localisation - the other side of the coin - is taking place in a number of ways: through uniquely local appropriations of the global (rock'n'roll, Indian style; African socialism; Deep South Olympics), and through self-conscious counterreactions led by groups and individuals who see their control over their own lives diminishing. Most of the latter phenomena can be labelled identity politics. They range from East European nationalisms to Amerindian liberation movements and North African political Islam. What they have in common is the insistence on maintaining cultural boundaries, and politicising them, in the Enlightenment/Romantic tradition from Herder and Boas, in a period where political, technological, cultural and economic trends militate against such boundaries. It seems neither rational nor viable to base a political

community on notions of cultural similarity or geographic proximity today, and yet powerful groups worldwide aim at doing just that.

The Internet inspires identity politics in two ways, directly and indirectly. Directly, through the intensification of alienation and the weakening of the national sphere, which encourages sub-national and trans-national "tribes" or other self-defined groupings to get their act together in a serious way.

Indirectly, as counterreactions against the dissolution of boundaries entailed by the Net, as earnest attempts to re-establish firm boundaries, self-evident traditions and objective truths. These counterreactions may dominate world politics in the 21st century. Some of them will carry the shiny garb of democracy, some will stress the virtues of the past and possibly the "race", while yet other will be based on a religion -- be it a religion of the book, an adapted Asian mysticism, or environmentalism. They all call for purity and boundaries in a world which has become irredeemably impure and unbounded. That, generally speaking, is the main contradiction defining the correlates of the political space in virtually every country today.

Consider, finally, how the tetrads sketched above may shed light on this contradiction - the tension between deterritorialised, nonlinear politics and traditional, national, geographically based politics. The intensification of new class divisions implies that a growing number of people feel left out and feel that they are losing their grasp on the conditions for their own existence. This is a main target group for identity politicians everywhere, but it is not the only one. The evolution of "discrete worlds" suggested in the social field, further, may lead to at least two kinds of subjective reaction: (i) Let the others do their thing, and I will get in touch with them when the need arises, (ii) The others are aliens and potential enemies. Pluralism and hegemony are two political alternatives. Finally, the cultural effects proposed may also lead to two main kinds of reaction: (i) There is no longer a *grand récit* of progress and truth, and for now we shall have to improvise; or (ii) Faith in Reason and centralisation must be retrieved as soon as possible.

The Internet intensifies identity politics, renders identity politics obsolete,

retrieves identity politics and may flip into identity politics. *This* is the agenda of the 21st century, and let us therefore not waste our time discussing whether the Internet and real-time technologies are democratic or not.

(To be continued.)