

## **Re-reading McLuhan in the second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century**

**Nagraj A**

*Assistant Professor Tezpur University (central University) Assam, India*

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**Abstract:** *The tools invented by humans have are having far reaching consequences on our society. Today we are living in information societies that are having an impact on our lifestyles. This is visible if one analyzes the trends in the societies. Information today is at the fingertips of many individuals, who uses new technologies for various goals, sometimes for self-gratification and at times for society, specially the media tools; The jet speed of information that passes from one corner of the world to other in seconds is used and abused by many: he/she may find some of this information useful and some redundant, but he is part of this ecology and is directly or indirectly affected by it. The internet is one environment where we see groups catering to the needs and necessities of their own, and these groups can very often be divided on a given issue. The various groups on internet are creating parallel worlds trying to destroy the other, also impose their hegemony by using all the mechanisms available.*

**Key words:** *Information societies, media, media environments, retribalization.*

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### **I. Re-reading McLuhan in the second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The latest media tools and the technologies that we are using today have an impact not just on the individual but on the environment. The much cherished concepts of “global village” and “global consciousness” are now turning out to be monsters that threaten to break apart all sense of solidarity across civilizations and cultures around the world. Information today is at the finger tips of any individual who uses new technologies; he/she may find some of this information useful and some redundant, but he is part of this ecology and is directly or indirectly affected by it. The jet speed of information that passes from one corner of the world to other in seconds is used and abused by many:

It is the velocity of media that determines the possible forms of self-consciousness or identity: print media fostered 'individualism' and 'nationalism' while the immediacy of electromagnetic media fosters retribalisation (groupism) on a world-wide scale• and disembodied existence (everybody is a no-body). (McLuhan 1962: 43).

The above statement of McLuhan is true if we analyze the situation today. Individualism and nationalism are passé; instead, with an overload of information we are confused with ourselves and with our identities. Further, selection of information is very often decided and persuaded by own interests.

It is a universal human tendency to tend to form groups for protecting oneself from outside forces. This trend is seen in the electronic media environments; retribalization (groupism) is taking shape with electric speed and is influencing the other environments equally. The internet is one environment where we see groups catering to the needs and necessities of their own, and these groups can very often be divided on a given issue. The various groups on internet are creating parallel worlds trying to destroy the other; they impose their hegemony by using all the mechanisms available. The fundamentalist and hate groups are most active in the internet environment creating frequent unrest in the societies, disturbing peace and tranquility within the regions and between nations. The groups deliberately post images, videos and articles that create disturbance in other parts of the world. Today the societies are not just revolving around economic, political and social issues but more around identities, religion and culture.

In many countries governments are formed by those who can guarantee its citizens of protecting their religion culture and identities from outside forces. The various groups and countries are becoming more aware of their self and this self-awareness is the cause of retribalization and groupism that is occurring around the world, especially with the help of media. The retribalization and groupism is very clearly visible if one looks at the top ten internet sites, it is no surprise at all, to find the youtube.com at the top. The content in the youtube.com is browsed and watched by millions of viewers all over the world. If one views the content that is available on this site, one would be surprised to find that the content is more about countering the viewpoint of others rather than being of original in however vague a sense. People make videos to counter the arguments of others and also to hold others up to ridicule. This trend is dangerous and is a serious threat to societies at large. We are seeing a

trend where the tools and technologies are used for destruction in every field of activity. Today, more than ever before the news that we get through various media tools is filled with propaganda; citizens of a country are not given the complete picture of the events and happenings by the governments, they are constantly been kept in dark, even the corporate media houses are becoming part of this propaganda that the government and few individuals plays.

'As Ecology takes over in all fields of human activity in the Eighties, every kind of change poses a pollution threat. (Cf. etymology of pollution) At the speed of light, everything affects everything ... Living at the speed of light, we feel ourselves equally vulnerable and insecure' (McLuhan 1979).

After decades of technological innovations in electronic media and its use, we act and react at every instance to the media without batting an eyelid; without caring about the consequences we tend to fire the gun and create more chaos and confusion. The news and events happening around the world are in the public domain because of the media tools, especially because of space biased media.

We have gone beyond the management of information into a new regime of representation - the 'virtual theatricalization of the real world' this new regime of representation is made possible by the 'fusion/confusion of information and data processing' in real tie. (Quoted in Hanke, 2003: 121)

The societies today are restless and intolerant in their approach to a given issue; we want every thing fast. Real time data is being distributed amongst the public by various government agencies and individuals to take a reality check before making a decision. The media on its part plays the role of spreading the information and sometimes orienting the public in the direction it wants to. The media all over the world that we see, here and use today challenges our thinking capacity and makes an individual act like a zombie; it controls our thinking capacity and actions, it also infuses thoughts, which are programmed to be performed by an individual in a given way, making the individual and the society more vulnerable. McLuhan, talking about the new technology of computers said,

The computer thus holds the promise of a technologically engendered state of universal understanding and unity, a state of absorption in the logos that could knit mankind into one family and create a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace. (McLuhan quoted McLuhan and Zingrone 1995: 262)

Today we see the opposite of this happening; the web is today filled with hate groups, spreading false facts and information. In many ways the war that is fought in the virtual world is becoming more dangerous than the real world. Countries like China, Russia, and United States along with many others are increasingly worried about the cyber attacks that could destroy the economy and also the defense systems of the country. Hundreds of dollars are spent in protecting classified digital data. The internet environment is also a battle ground for religious fundamentalists who are hurting their victims psychologically and this is leading to dangerous situation.

Being inundated with new information and a surfeit of culture results in 'mental breakdown'. (McLuhan 1964: 31).

McLuhan's fear has come true today; people become restless if they get some information. On the other hand, people also crave for information. There is a deluge of information leading to a sense of insecurity both at the level of the individual as well as the society.

The internet sites like Facebook, twitter, and youtube have become the new war zones, where the opponents are in a never ending battle. Most of the battles are fought on issues of religion and culture; both the proponents as well as the opponents try to prove that their religion or their culture is superior. A study conducted by the Simon Wiesenthal Center found that the use of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube by militant and hate groups grew by almost 20 percent in 2010. According to the report network sites, blogs and forums have grown from 10000 to 11500 in 2010.

Internet gives the individual the freedom of expression; it is also a knowledge hub for the people to learn from. But this knowledge hub is being increasingly diluted with biased information, and many fall into its trap and tend to believe what they see and read on these sites. Alternative points of view go side by side in the internet

environment; this is what confuses the people. The moment some information is posted on the net it moves with lighting speed and at the next moment it is being watched and read by millions of people around the world. The consequences of this can be for better or for worse.

The current 'information bomb' means that we are seeing the end of geography. The real-time bias of our global communications systems and cybernetic interactivity makes achieving a balanced civilization and a long-term perspective on questions of social concern and cultural survival impossible. (Virilio 2000b: 9).

There was unrest when cartoons of Prophet Muhammad appeared in a Danish magazine. This was followed by its entry in newspapers and then in the internet a few years ago, have lead one section of the society to protest in some parts of the world. Incidents like this keep on repeating, the instant information that is passed on from one person to another and from one medium to another within fraction of a second is a cause of worry for the governments around the world. The religious fundamentalist and terrorist organizations are encouraging one section of the community to attack and kill individuals and representatives of other countries and communities. The number of deaths is rising with incidents that are provoking a section of the society. The space biased media is also one of the reasons, as it reports the issues from the ground zero on a minute to minute basis. This electric speed of information, both visual and audio, that is watched in an instant by millions is encouraging a particular section of the society to create unrest.

The space-biased media and new technology together have given people enough freedom to express his/her views and also easily escape form the clutches of law. The democratic governments throughout the world are worried about the freedom granted by the internet to its citizens. The damage is done even before the government takes note or acts on the issue. The recent film "Innocence of Muslims" again on Prophet Muhammad that was made in the United States was uploaded on youtube with a pseudo name; the film has led to the attacks on United States consulates around the world especially in the Middle East, which killed four persons including an US Diplomat stationed in Libya. The repercussion of the film is being felt around the world, hundreds of innocents and few governments are suffering for the fault of others. Today any incident that sparks off in one part of the world has its ramifications within seconds; the speed at which these things unfold cannot be controlled by any groups or governments, as it is in the free and open environment (internet).

With more complex, tightly coupled technology, the effects of errors are much more damaging: 'In the computer world mistakes become "impossible" in all senses. *Whereas mechanical "dehumanization" wrecked the person, electric super -"humanization" wrecks the entire system'* (McLuhan and Nevitt 1972: 221, original italics).

Various environments are getting easily polluted by information (junk Information). Humans have no choice but to consume this hazardous information which is open to all, people are the victims of this environment directly or indirectly. The digital technologies may be the extensions of man as McLuhan argues but the use and abuse of these technologies is contaminating other environments. Media ecologist Haralod Innis sees a close relationship between the social changes that occur and the media's role in it. The technological innovations over the years have indeed polluted and destroyed many ecosystems, and these ecosystems once destroyed are hard to build again. The media ecologists have warned about the consequences of new media technologies and the long term impact that this is going to have on the human race.

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