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McLuhan on War

Marshall McLuhan¹ envisioned WW3 as a vast online conflict very similar to what we are currently experiencing. A conflict between the new identities and thinking patterns spawned by rapid technological change and those still clinging to traditional identities and patterns. Let's dig into his thinking for some insight.

A Guerrilla Information War

In 1968, Marshall McLuhan predicted²:

World War 3 is a guerrilla information war with no division between military and civilian participation.

This insight is on point. Let's dive into his thinking to figure out how he formulated it.

¹ Marshall McLuhan (d. 1980) focused on how technology transforms society.

² [War and Peace in the Global Village](#) by Marshall McLuhan 1968

The Medium is the Message

McLuhan's thinking, writing, and speaking style is both enigmatic and provocative. He does this purposely, to make the reader/listener uncomfortable (like a Zen *koan*) in order to force them out of the comfort of their current frame of reference and make them aware of a larger reality they might not have words to describe yet.

- The classic example of this is “*the medium is the message!*”³ The phrase roughly means that our new technologies *transform us* as we learn to use them to change the world around us. How does McLuhan see technologies transforming us?
- In McLuhan's view, the technologies we invent are best seen as extensions of our bodies⁴ and these extensions cause subtle, but substantial, changes in perception and thought. Changes that radically transform the way we see ourselves, communicate with each other, and organize our societies.
- Obviously, this transformation is painful *and* worse: we aren't fully aware of what is happening to us *while* the transformation is occurring. Sounds about right....

The Medium is the Warfare

Next, McLuhan maintained that...

- Changes in the dominant technological medium would create profound changes in identity -- how we see ourselves. This new identity will demand equally

³ McLuhan derived this insight from the work of Harold Innis. See “[Empire and Communications](#)” by Harold Innis (1950) for more. [Wikipedia reference](#).

⁴ For example: mechanical transportation in the form of wheels, cars, planes are extensions of our feet. They allow us to travel faster, further, etc. Electronic communication, from the radio to the Internet are extensions of our mind/nervous system. They change the way we learn and communicate.

profound changes in how society should be organized.

- This, naturally, creates a rift between those who identify themselves in traditional ways and those who identify themselves in the new way. Worse: these two groups don't even think in the same way.
- This rift causes wars (terrible ones). The classic example: the printing press > the Reformation > the rise of the nation-state.

How The Medium is Changing Us Now

So, let's apply some of McLuhan's thinking to today's situation. Social networking (Facebook added 670,000 active users a day over the last 12 months) is now the dominant technological medium. It's changing us even as we learn to how to use it to 'beneficial' effect. How are how Twitter, Facebook, SMS, YouTube, Instagram, etc. changing our perceptions and thinking patterns? Or, more specifically, how is it changing us in ways that impact politics and warfare? Here's my top three.

Pattern Matchers

Social networking has changed the way we think. It has turned us into pattern matchers. Here's how:

- We are bombarded with vast volumes of information arriving in parallel. It's simply impossible to process all of that information in a meaningful and critical way (like we do when we read a report or book).
- The only thing we can do in response to this voluminous flow, is to let the information wash over us. This means we can only see it in the gestalt (as a unit) and the only way to generate personal value from it from pattern matching. This

is the typical behavior: we constantly scan, looking for bits of information that neatly fit into the patterns we have *already* adopted as our own.

- How does this change us? It *narrows* us: we only engage with new information and conversations that fit into the patterns we already support. It makes us fast, but *superficial*: we pass immediate judgement on events and information based on the appearance of a fit with our adopted patterns. It also makes us *inflexible*: new information that calls into doubt an earlier judgement is considered a challenge to our adopted patterns and not the event itself. Since these adopted patterns are seen as essential to online survival, this new information is immediately rejected.

Aggressive and Expansionary

Social networking is both ephemeral and permanent. It is ephemeral in the immediate, since it flows past us and disappears, but it is also seemingly made permanent by positive feedback from others (likes, etc.). This combination makes us both aggressive and expansionary, here's how:

- We spend our time aggressively scanning/searching for new information (links, pictures, videos, etc.) that we can consume and share with others (for permanence). New information that expands the boundaries of “our patterns.” There are already legions of people who spend nearly every hour of every day doing this.
- We constantly react negatively to information that doesn't fit “our patterns” and we harass supporters of patterns we disagree with.
- As we invest in these patterns, the older, traditional forms of identity fall away (national, religious, party, etc.). They are replaced by plethora of new identities

based on loyalty to newly derived online patterns (#resistance, #insurgency, #maga, #abolishICE, etc.). These patterns become the narratives that bind us to new micro-tribes and micro-identities.

Global Villagers

Social networking crams us together. It radically reduces our proximity to everyone else in the world. According to McLuhan, this turns our world into a Global Village and us into Global Villagers. This means:

- As villagers, we are focused on everyone else's business. We want to monitor what they do and what they say. It turns us into gossips. We feel we are entitled to this knowledge. Anonymity disappears and is disregarded. We pore over tweets and posts to monitor what other people think and obsess over their online/offline behavior.
- We strictly enforce norms of behavior, speech, and belief. We become busybodies, prudes, and angry neighbors. Behavior that violates the norms is vilified and the perpetrator is shamed and shunned. We are even willing to video their behavior in the real world and share it online to punish them collectively.
- We become angry and reactive. As our proximity shrinks, we are more prone to extreme hatred, violence, and revenge both as individuals and as groups. Extreme proximity makes it impossible to ignore the things that offend us -- even though it is easy to block/unsub, we don't. This mindset bleeds over into the real world.

Where are these changes taking us?

McLuhan's formulation suggests the following framework for a coming global struggle/war/conflict.

- McLuhan (based on Teilhard's work⁵) believed that electronic media, since it is an extension of our mind/nervous system, is driving us towards extreme integration (the Global Village and beyond).
- This frame creates two sides. A group of people who would attempt to dominate the emerging centralized construct and those who would disrupt it -- in an attempt to preserve existing autonomy/individuality until another technological medium less hostile to it arrives. The integrators and disruptors.
- McLuhan, for his part, offered a third alternative, almost offhand. He said: “in order for us to live with ourselves in such depth, in such instant feedback situations, we have to understand everything... we (will) need to take over the total human (social) environment as an artifact.” In short, he suggested that in order to survive this integration without killing ourselves in the process, we will need to learn how to moderate/smooth/ease the intimate social interactions of 8 billion people. There’s one approach that has already demonstrated a potential to do that: a social AI.

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⁵ The Jesuit paleontologist, [Pierre Chardin Teilhard](#), predicted that evolution would drive mankind to create and integrated, global consciousness (a noosphere).

