

MCLUHAN AND THE "TORONTO SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION"

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How does one recognize a "school" of thought ? And why should one? These are questions that, concerning a truly distinctive and now distinguished intellectual trend originating in Toronto, I have entertained since the death of Marshall McLuhan on the last day of 1980. At the time I was impressed by the fact that Harold Innis, Eric Havelock and McLuhan, the three main scholars who taught that communication systems create definite psychological and social "states", had all been at the university of Toronto. The most significant common thread was that all three had explored different implications of ancient Greek literacy to support their theoretical approach. Even if they had not directly collaborated with each other, they had known each other's work and been inspired by common perceptions.

The word "school" appears in a mildly unflattering footnote to Goody and Watt's celebrated paper on "The Consequences of Literacy": "See in particular the somewhat extravagant work by Marshall McLuhan, formerly of Toronto, which elaborates on themes developed also at Toronto by Innis and later by E. A. Havelock and others; an appraisal of the work of Innis, McLuhan and the Toronto school has recently been made by Carey (1967) and Compton (1968). The work of Innis and Havelock influenced the paper that Watt and I wrote, but our more concrete interest in the subject arose from the wartime deprivation of written matter we experienced in different parts of the world and our sojourn amongst non-literate, illiterate or semi-literate people" (Jack Goody and Ian Watt, *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, 1968, p.1, n.1).

The University of Toronto harbours the quintessence of that anglo-canadian attitude, endearing and frustrating at once, which forbids one to speak highly of one's achievements. The implicit understanding is that when you have a spirit as boisterous as McLuhan, you hide it under a bushel. Being a Catholic immigrant raised partly in southern France, I have no such inhibition. Among the means to continue McLuhan's work during the eighties, I felt that promoting the notion of a school would help people within and without the university community to understand that McLuhan was not just an "intellectual comet", an oddball of the academic world. Not only did McLuhan fit in rather closely within a strain of thought which was unique in the world at the time, and uniquely in Toronto, not only did he take place next to two other intellectual giants, almost as controversial as he was, but he was also a channel by which the other two would get better known. Furthermore, with a legitimated McLuhan, the university of Toronto had a chance to attract serious attention worldwide, even beyond the confines of the academic mindset. To the university, McLuhan, still after his death, was giving a sort of media profile, even as government, business and the arts communities were invoking his name. He was one of the very rare academics to become a public icon in a way that Northrop Frye himself, another world famous scholar with equally wide ranging interests was not.

The University seems to have done its best to turn this opportunity down. It took almost three years and constant pressure from within and without to revive the Centre for Culture and Technology under its new guise as the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology, on a one-year-only-non-renewable grant of \$20,000 from the School of Graduate Studies. Still, I believed that the academic community, failing to see the PR value of McLuhan's fame, would not fail to recognize the importance of being associated with a clearly identifiable school of thought, alive and thriving not only at the university of Toronto, but also elsewhere, in the US, France and Italy. Being on the steering committee of three international conferences on McLuhan (Venice, 1982, Paris, 1983 and Toronto, 1985), I made sure in all three that the contribution of McLuhan be perceived within the context of a larger, Toronto based preoccupation with the effects of communication technologies.

On the last occasion, I presented the Toronto school of communications as the theme of the opening remarks to a colloquium on "Innis, McLuhan and the Frontiers of Communications" which I helped to organize at Innis College, university of Toronto, in March 1985. Jack Goody was there, the keynote speaker, sitting next to David Olson and to Brian Stock, whom I introduced as counting among the most professional and most admired explorers of the impact of literacy on psychology and culture. To my amazement, all three registered instant disapproval of the very notion of a school. Brian Stock politely - and publicly - declined to be included in the fast growing number of qualified and not so qualified scholars

involved in pursuing the direction set by the seminal trio. Goody, when confronted with the idea in conversation, appeared not to remember very clearly the circumstances inspiring him to phrase his own footnote. Needless to say I left the conference not a little mortified, as if I had been caught in "flagrant délit" of corporate self-promotion.

That was the low point in the history of one idea which seems to be gaining momentum. George Cook, for example, in a short essay for the University of Toronto Bulletin ("Mantic Marshall McLuhan: is the legacy the legend?", September 12, 1988, p. 7.) quotes an excerpt from a letter from McLuhan to Rollo May: "From Plato to the present, in the Western world, there has been no theory whatever of psychic change resulting from technological change. The exception is the work of Harold Innis and his disciples, Eric Havelock and McLuhan". Another, more recent, and perhaps more influential statement is the head article of the June 16-22 issue of the TLS, headlined as "Revolutions in literacy from ancient Greece to Toronto". In the introduction, the author, Oswyn Murray, fellow of Balliol College at Oxford University, goes as far as suggesting that Toronto (unbeknownst, of course, to Torontonians - and to the School of Graduate Studies) was "for a brief period the intellectual centre of the world". Murray goes on saying that in Toronto, "a new theory was born, the theory of the primacy of communication in the structuring of human cultures and the human mind" ("The Word is mightier than the pen", *The Times Literary Supplement*, No 4,498, p. 655). Interestingly enough, Murray includes Jack Goody in the Toronto aura, evidently because Havelock himself, reminiscing on the origins of the theory in the early chapters of his last book, *The Muse Learns to Write*, mentions the part played by Goody in his first publication in 1963—with Ian Watt—of "The consequences of literacy".

And yet, in spite of Havelock's own description of the beginning of the theory, there remains a confusion of levels which ought to be cleared to really understand the impact of the school. Most media studies and even most interpretations or evaluations of the great literacy theory, after a rapid survey of the medium, fall back into a sort of expanded content analysis. Jack Goody's latest books or Elizabeth Eisenstein's remarkable volumes on *The Printing Press as an agent of change* (1979), are cases in point. In 1962, Eisenstein set out, by her own admission, to prove McLuhan wrong, and almost twenty years later confessed that he had been right. But she did not really understand what McLuhan was after. The cognitive dimensions of the print-based revolution following the Renaissance largely escaped her attention because it was riveted to the social and political economy of print material. Goody, especially in the early essay had gone a long way to suggest that something exclusive to Greek literacy was responsible for typically western categories of knowledge, but later, he retreated to a more prudent position. First in *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977) and now in *The*

Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society (1988), he has chosen to attribute to a critical mass of literacy cognitive consequences that warrant a closer association with the structure of the orthography itself. Indeed, the inner logic of thought which is characteristic of western cognition may be in part dependent upon the inner logic of writing which is exclusively found in the greco-roman alphabets and their derivatives.

Havelock, McLuhan and, to a lesser degree, Innis, all addressed the issue of the structure of the communication medium itself. They have gone much deeper into the analysis, and that is where the strength of their most interesting conclusions is found. While Innis, owing to his early training in the staple theory, remained primarily concerned with the networking aspects of the ecology of a given medium, Havelock and McLuhan paid closer attention to the distinguishing features of the media themselves. They were looking for possible effects of media deep into the mechanics of the writing system or the electronic medium in question. Havelock did not stray very far into speculations about present day media, but he painstakingly analyzed the composition and the special features of the Greek alphabet to compare them with the characteristics of other orthographies and to find out what made the Greek culture so special. His greatest insight was to point out in four brilliant papers given in 1976 at the Ontario Institute for Studies In Education that the atomisation of speech in the fully phonetic alphabet of the Greeks led the processing of information to a level of abstraction and reliability not found in any other writing system. He proposed several cognitive consequences among which the most valuable is discussed in *Preface to Plato* in the chapter on "The separation of the knower from the known". The suggestion is that, by making the full sequence of linguistic sounds available to critical appraisal thanks to the full unambiguous sequence of phonemes, the Greeks were the first writers to take rational and detached control over our principal means of communications.

McLuhan tried to show in his doctoral thesis on *The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of his Time* (1943), that the effect of visualizing oral languages with the phonetic alphabet was to subject them to virtually systematic analyses which eventually became the three main branches of the classical Trivium, grammar, logic and rhetoric. I have suggested elsewhere that Innis, as a historian of relationships, was typically a grammarian, while Havelock, exposing the relationship between structure and cognition was a logician of media studies. As the rhetorician of the three, McLuhan studied the relationships between the user and the medium. He was especially fascinated by the physical setting and the pragmatic functioning of radio, television and computers. While Innis looked for facts, Havelock searched for causes and McLuhan discovered effects. In so doing, McLuhan let a huge cat out of a rather small bag, setting a large number of mostly American scholars on the track of what Walter Ong called the "secondary orality" of electronic media. Indeed, with television and computers, the medium is the

message because it grabs the user's nervous system in so powerful an embrace as to literally "program" it for specific decisions and actions.

With McLuhan, it became clear, on the other hand, that western individualism and its concomitant autonomous psychology is largely owed to the possibility afforded by books alone to make up one's own mind. This theme was not lost on at least three significant American scholars who claim McLuhan as an important source of inspiration, Neil Postman, Paul Saenger and Joshua Meyrowitz.

What's in a school? As Murray suggests: "The 'Toronto School' was scarcely indeed a school: the different individuals worked in different areas, and soon developed different directions and dispersed to other countries. It is also unclear how aware they were of their mutual relations at the start. Havelock makes a reasonable claim for their independence from each other; if anything he offers himself as the prime mover, but he was too much of a maverick ever to have been a leader, and it is hard not to trace the initial impetus back to Harold Innis. The fact is that in a cohesive intellectual community like Toronto in the late 1950s it must have been impossible not to make the necessary interdisciplinary connections" (op. cit. p. 655). In reality, there is abundant evidence in McLuhan's work of his acknowledgement of his debt both to Innis and to Havelock and maybe it is McLuhan who created first the impression of an intellectual bond between the three. As Donald Theall astutely observed in an essay on Innis: "it is most likely that Innis and McLuhan shared similar interests because they shared a similar milieu. One of the prime characteristics of that milieu was a kind of marginality to the mainstream of North American influence today—the United States".

Still, a tree, even a genealogical tree can best be judged by the fruits that it bears. The legacy of the Toronto School is now taking considerable proportions, not only in Toronto, but all over the world in vastly different contexts and widely differing types and levels of academic and non-academic expertises. In Toronto alone, whether they wish to be included or not matters little, there are at least seven people who could lay claim to a direct influence of not just one or the other "founding father", but of the thrust of the theory generally. There is no more unity there than among the originals, as if each one would rather be the head of his own school. Brian Stock could have hardly found elsewhere the title and the theme of his *Implications of Literacy* (1982) where he develops the notion of "textual communities" in the general context of medieval orality. David Olson staked his ground in an important paper published in 1977 in the *Harvard Educational Review*, "From utterance to text", where he first exposed an absorbing psychological model for the interpretation of meaning oral and literal. York university sociologist John O'Neill is not afraid of recognizing Innis and McLuhan's influence on his own remarkable essays on present day sociopolitics (e.g. *Five Bodies*, 1985). Even if he is quite systematically ostracized by the inner sanctum, Robert K. Logan did a credible replay of the Innis-McLuhan hypotheses in *The*

Alphabet Effect (1987). Though outside of the confines of academe, Barrington Nevitt pours volume after volume of recognizably McLuhanesque insights on the economy. Eric McLuhan recently produced a posthumous co-authorship with his father of *The Laws of the Media* (1989) were some of the old pyrotechnics are rekindled. I might also propose not too modestly my own contribution in a collection of essays exploring *The Alphabet and the Brain: The lateralization of writing* where over twenty scientists from various disciplines ranging from genetics to epigraphology, neurophysiology and developmental psychology examine whether a case can be made for the impact of the alphabet on the neuropsychology of information-processing.

The fact that you could not put more than two of any of the aforementioned in the same room without generating polite hostilities, does not prevent them from belonging to the same quest. The diffidence is partly due to the rigors of the academic class system. All kinds of people, academics or not including real artists and con artists have found inspiration in the trio, in McLuhan especially. But the deeper reason for such rivalries lies, in my opinion, in the fact that what is at stake is not your academic garden variety of inconsequential theorizing, but a radically new ideology. What the Toronto School has to offer may soon be seen to compete with Marxist and Freudian models to propose a deep structure of human behaviour. While the socialist model explains man in terms of collectives motivated and guided by means of production, the Freudian theory has served as a legitimation for the opposite model of the individual engaged in the free enterprise economy. The understanding that technology and especially communication media because they affect the main processor of all culture, language, mould the psychological and social shape of society could eventually override the other two models to provide the basis for a radical social reorganization. The political message implicit in the Toronto School's approach is that it takes two wings to fly.

This could potentially affect political and economic decision processes as well as social policies in a democratic context. But we are only at the earliest stage, that where only a small number of intellectuals are beginning to learn that technology and media are indeed working us over. Most decision-makers are still following blindly larger patterns that they do not perceive. For example, owing to popular bureaucratic mythologies, everybody talks about functional and dysfunctional literacy without knowing the first thing about it, without perceiving, for instance, that literacy is not just a tool to make us better prepared to deal with the economy, but a complete "way-of-life" competing with other, more powerful technologies for the control of our psyche. Vast amounts of monies and energies are about to be poured into the retraining of roughly 25% of the Canadian population which is deemed to be illiterate. But neither business nor government nor the mainstream of academe have a clue about how literacy really fits within the cognitive priorities of our own culture. Literacy is only the first base. Hardly anybody knows how to

approach the social, psychological and political consequences of the computerization of the human mind and language.

As we are about to enter the perilous age of human cognitive and genetic engineering, the little information about culture and technology gathered by the poorly understood and poorly supported group of researchers inspired by the theory of media developed by the Toronto School of Communications, will soon be more relevant than all the rest of humanities and social sciences put together. As scholars immersed into the understanding of the implications of technology for the building and rebuilding of the very image of man, let alone his derivative economic and political organizations, we share into the excitement of the edge.