Perhaps the most controversial of the academic approaches to the mass media is that of Marshall McLuhan, a professor of English at the University of Toronto who brought tribal concepts to the study of technological cultures. Reading him as a prophet of perception rather than as a behavioural scientist is more rewarding for students of the mass media.

For McLuhan the critical technical difference between today's world and all previous ones is its ability to transmit information almost instantaneously between any two points on earth. Where once communication between separated individuals depended on mechanical means such as the wheel, today electric circuitry makes it possible to eliminate the time separation. The communication methods we have developed also make radically different demands on human senses. Such changes in communications technology are bringing about equally radical changes in the quality of social culture and in the character of politics.

According to McLuhan, our method of thinking and acting, and, indeed, our whole culture, depends upon the exterior means by which we express ourselves and receive communications. Until the fourteenth century, European life was perceptually much like that of tribal people: knowledge was the preserve of the wise and was passed on through oral communication to people in social groups. Life was lived in depth by virtue of an undistorted development of the senses as a whole. The norm was living in groups and not as individuals. This mode of living existentially and in 'total sense involvement' was shattered by the development of phonetic alphabets and movable type set in the Gutenberg fashion (words fixed in limited line after line and in left to right order). Repeatable print ended the priesthood's near monopoly of knowledge. It made possible the comparison of once-isolated data bits which could also be accumulated into information wholes.

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The communication of knowledge was transformed. What had been an oral process conducted in groups became an individual experienced depending on eyes rather than ears. The Gutenberg press created the book and newspaper—the first social messages which individuals could receive in private and free of group pressures. McLuhan's 'Gutenberg culture' had four important features: (1) individualism, (2) social fragmentation, (3) distortion of the natural balance between man's senses in favour of the visual, and, (4) the spread of a logical, sequential mode of thinking and personal detachment. This last stood in important contrast to the subjectivism of total and simultaneous involvement of all the senses in perceiving experience. While not made explicit, McLuhan's approach implies direct links between Gutenberg press, books, large scale labour specialization, privacy, individualism, egalitarian movements, and mass participation in decision-making.

Was the emergence of nationalism one of the many unforeseen consequences of typography? McLuhan thinks so. While not impossible before the invention of printing, it was certainly difficult to unify populations politically along language groupings. It could be done, and was, but it took a lot of expensive military force. With a printing press unification of territory on the basis of common ideas, common aspirations, common appeals, and, above all, a common language became much easier. McLuhan summarizes the process in his occasionally colourful language as: "the tribe, and extended form of blood relatives, is exploded by print, and is replaced by an association of men homogeneously trained to be individuals." Nationalism required the rapid and near-simultaneous transfer of similar data to many geographical areas. The printing press was only part of it. Mechanical means of physical communications such as the railway also speeded up the processes of nationalism and centralization.

Electrical communication is wreaking a second revolution which has implications for both our natural senses and our politics. Television is a particularly potent agent of this new revolution but the telegraph and radio were important precursors. As people turn away from excessive reliance on vision and the print media, the natural balance of their senses reapproaches normal and the old individualistic, sequential society begins to give way. Where print media were fragmenting in social effect. The electric media are essentially unifying, McLuhan argues that electronic cultures are in the process of becoming less individualist and more oriented towards the social or corporate whole. Boundaries between private and public sectors are shifting ever so surely towards the public side, and, as the electronic world expands, we can expect to see new kinds of tribalism. McLuhan calls this the 'global village'. Everyone in it will be concerned about all others because of television's ability to involve
millions in the problems and emotions of people both near and far.

"Involvement that goes with our instant technologies transforms the most 'socially-conscious' people into conservatives," according to this view. Presumably we become conservative because we are no longer rebelling against society as a whole, no longer fighting the battle of the beleaguered individual, but are identifying ourselves more and more with the corporate whole.

The immediate prospect for literate, fragmented Western man encountering the electric implosion within his own culture is his steady and rapid transformation into a complex and depth-structured person emotionally aware of his total interdependence with the rest of human society. Representatives of the older Western individualism are even now assuming the appearance, for good or ill, of Al Capp's General Bullmoose or of the John Birchers, tribally dedicated to opposing the tribal. (Canada, Royal Commission on Publications, Report Ottawa, 1961, 5-6.)

McLuhan argues that it is the speed of modern communication systems that knits together private and public awareness into an integrated whole. "We are compelled to react to the world as a whole...because electric media instantly create a total field of interacting events in which all men participate."