Introduction

Our lives are more and more determined by technologies, in particular by technologies that allow us to communicate with one another more cheaply, more rapidly, and across greater distances. In such circumstances posing the question about how to live in a technological world is unavoidable. If we are interested in finding an answer to the question posed above, Marshall McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is a book that has still much to say to us. So what does this book have to say fifty years after its publication to a global society that has undergone such radical changes?

The book contains at least two intuitions that have the potential to change the way we relate to one aspect of our lives that has become more and more important: our relationship with technology and specifically with communication technology. I will sketch out a path that has the potential to avoid the two extremes of technological enthusiasm and total Luddite rejection of technology.

One of the most significant changes that has taken place in society since McLuhan is the so-called *digital revolution* in which information converted in binary code becomes more important even than physical reality. Summarizing Nicholas Negroponte’s book on the digital age, we can affirm that “bits are more to us than atoms.”[i] Many, such as Crawford, Turkle, and
Carr argue [iii] that the digital age is not the paradise it was promised to be. Technology makes us feel more alone (Turkle), more distracted (Crawford), and sometimes incapable of real human connection. Indeed, some claim that the internet is making us stupid as well (Carr). Authors such as Carr, Turkle, Crawford, Lynch, Lopez, and others expose the fact that the much-anticipated digital age has importantly undermined our humanity.

I shall claim in this article that two of McLuhan’s intuitions might open a path to counteract the dehumanizing aspects of our “smartphone shaped” existences. This path may lead us back to Socrates’ ideal of an examined life.

**The Main Argument of The Gutenberg Galaxy**

*The Gutenberg Galaxy* is a book about the effects of the introduction of a movable type press on practically any- and everything conceivable, from politics to economy, from science to art, from society as a whole to the individual’s perception of time and space. McLuhan’s book is based on a core argument: the human being’s five senses are organized as a whole into a *sensorium*. The internal organization of the *sensorium* functions according to laws that prioritize one sense or group of senses over the others. These laws, according to McLuhan:

a) change in relation to a given communication technology;

b) govern the way in which the individual perceives and appraises the world;

c) and therefore give shape to the whole cultural landscape of a given culture.

All this means that if you communicate only orally (i.e., if you live in a culture that has not discovered writing), your *sensorium* will be organized by laws that give priority to hearing and touch over that of sight. This, in turn, leads the individual to perceive and appraise the world in a way that is not only influenced but completely shaped by this priority. This means that persons from cultures where the oral way of communication organizes the *sensorium* by hearing and touch live in a world that McLuhan repeatedly describes as “magical.”

It should be noted that by “magical” McLuhan means inhabited by obscure forces that act unpredictably. Examples of oral magic can be found in many different cultures that range from the daily life of the Azande tribe to the Homeric hero. Evans-Pritchard describes in colorful detail how the Azande attribute every “unfortunate event” in their life to witchcraft [iii]: “If blight seizes the ground-nut crop, it is witchcraft; if the bush is vainly scoured for game; if women laboriously bale water out of a pool and are rewarded by but a few fish it is witchcraft.” A Zande boy hurts himself knocking his foot on a stump. He was careless—argued the anthropologist. The stump wasn’t placed there by witchcraft. But it was witchcraft that made him careless—argued the Zande boy.[iv]

Homeric characters lived lives dominated by gods. Their action was unpredictable, capricious, and often malevolent. Moeller, for instance, holds the view that Homeric heroes cannot be fully held morally responsible for their actions and reactions because the gods somehow take hold of them. The Homeric hero perceives the gods as forces driving him irresistibly, like Heracles who
slaughters his own sons after being induced by Pallas to believe they were his enemies, or like Helen irresistibly drawn to Paris by Aphrodite.

What it is that causes a particular hero to take a certain course of action are mysterious personal forces acting at the same time as the hero's actions. Both in the example of the Azande boy and the examples of the Homeric heroes, an unseen malevolent force acting at the same time as the event or action is seen as the true cause of it. This is due to the fact—McLuhan seems to suggest—that the auditory field is characterized by simultaneity: different sounds are all perceived at the same time. Sight, by contrast, is successive: things are seen one at a time. Magic can only happen in a simultaneous field, one that doesn’t allow the perception of cause as prior to effect. A lineal perception of time—McLuhan argues—allows seeing causal, mechanical, and logical connections between events. Priority given to sight thus destroys the very core of the magic conception of the world. Heracles slaughtered his offspring due to some temporary psychiatric condition that you can find in the DSM-V, such as a brief psychotic disorder associated with hallucination and violent behavior, and the Zande boy was really careless, in a culture dominated by the visual field.

In other words, the communication technology a given culture uses determines how individuals belonging to that culture perceive the world. The way in which the individual perceives the world in turn determines the whole cultural landscape in which the individual lives in terms of values, social organization, beliefs, practices, etc.

Western Culture and Some Critical Remarks on The Gutenberg Galaxy

In The Gutenberg Galaxy McLuhan tries to apply his theory regarding the organization of the sensorium as shaper of cultures to the whole of Western civilization after the introduction of movable type press in the fifteenth century. What the Canadian thinker tries to accomplish is, in fact, to give an account of how Gutenberg’s invention has molded Western culture in any and every aspect. The Gutenberg Galaxy takes the shape of a collection of seemingly unrelated essays, some describing a facet of Western culture before Gutenberg and some after.

McLuhan is not the only one suggesting that technology tends to shape decisively both culture and society. Harold Innis in his Empire and Communication [vi] suggests that it is impossible to think of a human society organized as an empire without a communication technology that allows messages to be interchanged across long distances. Walter Ong in his Orality and Literacy [vii] describes the psychology of the oral man. He also depicts how the psychological structure of the oral man changes when writing is introduced.

Seen from the point of view of established disciplines, the book is hard to classify. Is it a history book that investigates a past event, namely the introduction of a movable type press? Is it a psychology book that attempts to unveil the effect of a new technology on the individual’s perception of space and time? Is it a sociology book that tries to shed light on how social change results as the product of the introduction of a new technology? Is the book an examination of how literature reflects social change? If you read the book as a specialist in one of these disciplines and you believe in rigorous boundaries between different specialties, it will certainly
disappoint you for its lack of rigor. Gutenberg's Galaxy is a far away galaxy in the sense that it is far from being a piece of traditional scholarship.

McLuhan's book, if you're a scientific-minded scholar, is disappointing also in that one of its main theses was proven false. He hypothesized that the culture in which he lived, heavily determined by television, had noteworthy similarities with oral cultures, where everything is temporally simultaneous. From that he deduced that cultures in which patterns of orality still survived would have a comparative advantage with respect to cultures determined by print.

If television and other electronic media are rearranging the sensorium of the people of the whole planet in such a way that the whole culture of the globe becomes basically oral, it is obvious to predict that those ethnic groups who practice orality and don't have to learn it anew like the West had to, will attain political and economic supremacy. This didn't happen. We haven't seen the Azande or any other oral culture dominate the world through television.

McLuhan's Lasting Intuitions

That said, McLuhan's insights have the potential to be the basis of a more humane life in the digital age. I will focus on two. I'm going to call the first of the two the principle of transparency, and the second the principle of inseparability.

The Principle of Transparency

According to the principle of transparency, an age in which communication technology is changing is open to a new self-understanding in a way that other ages are not. McLuhan, although too prone to express his thoughts in an oracular and fragmented (annoying) way, nonetheless knows that if he wants to be taken seriously he has to answer a very simple but essential question: “Why now?” In other words, why only now in history do the effects of communication technology on culture as a whole become visible? Why didn’t, for example, Plato or Descartes or Kant notice that communication technology, by means of a restructuring of the sensorium, affects the whole cultural life of mankind?

McLuhan answers with surprising simplicity to the above question: “Perhaps the reason for the omission [of noticing the effects of communication technology on culture as a whole] is simply that the job could only be done when two conflicting forms of written and oral experience were once again co-existent as they are today.”[viii] Maybe McLuhan was a genius, but the historical context in which he lived was unique in giving him the possibility to see what no one before could. Television and radio bring back into the cultural life of the West forms of life that are typical of oral and tactile societies. The very fact that two forms of experience, the written and the oral, are conflicting and co-exist, opens the possibility of a new kind of cultural self-awareness. A culture, i.e., a historical context, in which conflicting communication technologies co-exist becomes aware of the effects of those same technologies on itself, and therefore is transparent to itself.

To summarize, according to the principle of transparency we live in an historical context that is
transparent to itself, that is to say, self-aware of the effects of technology on itself.

*The Principle of Inseparability*

The principle of inseparability refers to the fact that according to McLuhan we have to reject something very deeply rooted in our comprehension of communication: the possibility of separating form and content. According to McLuhan, the “medium is the message.” One possible way of understanding McLuhan’s line—which I find the most convincing—is the following: a given communication technology, a medium in McLuhan’s terminology, has effects on society as a whole. These effects are produced almost entirely by the introduction of a new communication technology, regardless of what is actually communicated through it. For instance, books change our way of perceiving space not because something is written in them such that we have to perceive space in a new way, but because reading in a sequential line changes the way we use our eyes. This change brings with itself a new understanding of space itself.

From the point of view of the change brought by reading books in the understanding of space, *what* is written in a book, its content, is altogether indifferent. What matters is the fact that books are read.

Another example of the inseparability principle can be drawn from Harold Innis. Empires need writing. For an empire to function as empire, it requires that relatively dense messages with a great amount of instruction, orders, lists and so on reach long distances in relatively short spans of time. Power cannot be exerted over long distances without writing. It is not important whether the empire is good or bad, whether the orders given through writing are just or unjust. For an empire to exist it does not matter what is communicated through writing. It is important that writing exists as communication technology. These two examples may not explain fully McLuhan’s line. To better grasp the point, it might be helpful to point out the alternative understanding of communication technology: the *instrumental conception*. According to that conception, a technology is a mere instrument. Content is the leading force in this conception. If the content of the communication technology is good, human life will flourish. If the content is bad, then human life will become corrupt. If we transmit good television, we will educate the masses. If we transmit pornography, we will pervert them. In other words, communication technology is a neutral vessel. This is a conception according to which it is possible to separate the content and form of a given message. But this ignores the very thesis that McLuhan and others have so thoroughly articulated: that a given communication technology has effects on culture in itself, regardless of what is communicated through it.

It should be noted that the inseparability principle comes with a somewhat counter intuitive corollary that applies to our daily lives: communication technology cannot be used innocently. The more we use technology, the more we are somehow also used by it. As an example, we can think of how our smartphones have extended our work time. We bought a smartphone as a useful tool that should make our life easier (with a smartphone and Google Maps you won’t get lost anymore), but we may find ourselves answering emails from our boss at odd hours (which leads to a reduction of the quality of time we spend with our families).
The Examined Technological Life

It is obvious that in the Canadian thinker’s book you won’t find any easy answers. Our epoch is so strongly marked by a continuous revolution in the way new technologies shape our daily lives and our way of communicating. So why read it now?

According to McLuhan’s principle of transparency, there are cultures or historical circumstances that are particularly aware of the effects of communication technology on themselves. Only cultures in which different communication technologies compete are granted such an awareness. This is particularly true of our present time. So, if McLuhan is right, then today we have the possibility of being even more aware of the effects of technology on our lives than in McLuhan’s time, precisely because today we have even more competing technologies.

If the principle of transparency leads to a general awareness of the effects of technology on society as a whole, then the principle of inseparability grants us the possibility of being aware of the effect of any single new technology. The principle of inseparability becomes then a conceptual tool that allows us to analyze at what cost we become a user of certain technology. What kind of friendship is a Facebook friendship? What kind of discussion is a Twitter discussion? What does it mean to have Netflix in our homes? Might it result in the disruption of family life?

The two great intuitions of McLuhan’s invite us to ask broad and deep questions about our culture as a whole and about our private lives as influenced by media. Both of them put us on critical alert: technology comes with a price.

This way it is possible to envision a form of life in the digital age in which technology is neither condemned in an a priori fashion nor a-critically embraced. I speak about a form of life in which the question regarding where technology is leading society and the question regarding the effects of any single new technology is consciously and deliberately cultivated.

Thus The Gutenberg Galaxy is an introduction to nothing less than a form of life. A form of life that doesn’t take for granted any easy answer to the question of technology and thus rejects both Luddism and technological enthusiasm. In its wake I envision a life of relentless questioning. In short, it fosters a form of life that revives in the digital age the Socratic ideal of the “examined life.”


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