



KONINKLIJKE VLAAMSE ACADEMIE VAN BELGIE
VOOR WETENSCHAPPEN EN KUNSTEN

**MCLUHAN'S PHILOSOPHY OF MEDIA
– CENTENNIAL CONFERENCE**

26-28 October 2011

**Yoni Van Den Eede, Joke Bauwens, Joke Beyl,
Marc Van den Bossche & Karl Verstrynghe (eds.)**

CONTACTFORUM

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, MORAL ANXIETY, AND THE IMPLOSION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE: A PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION OF THE MCLUHANIAN PROBLEM OF RESPONSIBILITY

Mark Coeckelbergh

Department of Philosophy, University of Twente

1. INTRODUCTION

McLuhan's insight that media and technologies have psychic and social consequences is central to all good philosophy of technology and media theory. Moreover, his idea that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964) seems to be particularly applicable to contemporary information technologies and media, which have a significant impact on our lives and on society, and which often invoke the promise of moral and political change.

Decades before the Internet, McLuhan's vision was that a "global village" is emerging. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) he refers to Teilhard de Chardin's idea of a "noosphere" to describe the global effect of "electric" technology. In McLuhan's reading of de Chardin, the noosphere becomes a world-wide computer: he writes that through the "externalization of our senses," "the world has become a computer, an electronic brain" (McLuhan, 1962, p. 32). Thus, he suggests a kind of perceptual, experiential compression. In *Understanding Media* (1964), he understands this as a kind of extension:

Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned (McLuhan, 1964, p. 3).

These ideas are well-known – to the point of having become clichés (which does not necessarily mean that McLuhan is also well-read and well understood, or that the ideas are even attributed to McLuhan). However, McLuhan's suggestions about the implications of the "global village" for moral responsibility are often overlooked. Assuming that McLuhan is right about "the global village" as a techno-social development, what are the *moral* consequences of the experiential compression he describes? What does it mean for our responsibility? Is responsibility also *globalized*?

This paper constructs what we may call McLuhan's "moral compression" thesis and offers a preliminary discussion of its psychological, epistemological, and ethical-political aspects. It will be argued that there are at least three barriers to the heightened responsibility-awareness and global consciousness McLuhan projects, and to more responsible action. This argument is not only relevant to McLuhan scholars, but aims to contribute to a broader inquiry into the conditions of possibility for the emergence of global responsibility, given relevant technological changes.

Thus, the paper has a twofold aim: it will 1. critically examine McLuhan's view; and 2. articulate a number of moral problems raised by new information technologies that are highly relevant to work in philosophy of technology and media theory – McLuhanian or not – concerned with the moral and political promises often associated with contemporary information and communication technologies.

2. MORAL ANXIETY AND GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

The key to understanding the moral consequences of the global village – and indeed to recognizing *that* there are moral consequences at all – is McLuhan's suggestion that the new technologies do not only globalize our perceptions and our experience, but also the consequences of all actions – or at least our experience of these consequences.

In his introduction to *Understanding Media*, he writes that “when our central nervous system is technologically extended to the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us, we necessarily participate, in depth, in the consequences of every action” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 4). According to McLuhan, this experiential compression has moral consequences: in the new age we can no longer operate in a detached and uninvolved way since the global village contracts “all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion” that “has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree” and that “compels commitment and participation” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 5).

According to McLuhan, this heightened awareness of responsibility leads to anxiety. We feel we have to participate. We cannot escape responsibility. Yet we can hardly cope with this. In *The Medium is the Massage* he writes:

The media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, p. 26).

Thus, there seems to be a gap between, on the one hand, the evolution of media and their consequences, from which emerge new media which demand total commitment and participation from us, and on the other hand our “old” moral, political, and psychological institutions and capacities, which have not evolved to the same degree.

But can we *ever* live up to this kind of “global” responsibility? And can we really reach the kind of *moral* awareness McLuhan thinks the new technologies create? There are at least the following barriers to this kind of moral awareness and to globally responsible action, which are related to three questions: “Do we want to know?”; “What can we know?”; and “What can we do?”

3. BAD FAITH: DO WE WANT TO KNOW?

Global responsibility is hard to bear; there are psychological limits to it. We cannot carry the world upon our shoulders – if we want to at all. In particular, McLuhan's thesis suggests a problematic Sartrean, existentialist view of responsibility, in which absolute individual responsibility is in tension with attempts to evade that responsibility.

In *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946) Sartre argued that we are responsible for all of humanity and for everything that we do. We cannot escape responsibility. If we deny our freedom, if we do not take up that responsibility, we do not act authentically. We are free but we act as if we are a kind of thing rather than a human being.

Similarly, we can read in McLuhan an appeal to absolute responsibility, a moral demand one cannot escape. But we can also imagine the possibility of a kind of “bad faith”: we may refuse to see the moral implications of global consciousness and hence avoid McLuhanian moral anxiety.

This conception of ethics is not only hard to live by psychologically – Kierkegaard called the ethical “strict and harsh” (Kierkegaard, 1843, p. 118) and the ethical demand is infinite – but is also problematic in various ways, for example since it assumes a rather exotic view of human beings and their capacities to know and to act. Rather than being absolute, it seems that for the kind of beings we are, responsibility is a matter of degree, depending on how much you know and how much you do. Although the new technologies have undoubtedly increased our knowledge and our participation, they have not made us omniscient and omnipotent. McLuhan did not make a logical error: if his implosion would be complete, something very similar to an omniscient and omnipotent entity might indeed come into being. But an empirical basis for his interpretation is lacking: the implosion is not complete. We have not become *one*. Participation is not total. Thus, we should not assume that we can know and act in the way McLuhan suggests. In the next sections I will further develop this point.

This means that if people do assume a divine-like absolute responsibility à la Sartre or indeed à la McLuhan, they are not *necessarily* acting in “bad faith” if that means to evade responsibility; they are only evading responsibility if they do less than they could do, given their circumstances, capacities, other people’s preferences and values, etc. – all these things Sartre would see as making us into things. In contrast to Sartre, we must evaluate humans by human standards, and return to the finite and the relative. It is not bad to deny absolute freedom but quite sane. It is only bad, if at all, to deny that you are partially responsible. What differs in the digital age, is perhaps indeed that we are more aware of that responsibility and that due to the pervasion of the new media we cannot entirely escape that awareness and responsibility, but luckily we need not view this responsibility in such absolute terms.

This conclusion does not deny that even a limited responsibility can cause psychological problems for people in the information age: we may still feel “worked over” by the media, we may be touched by its moral pervasiveness to the point of anxiety. But we might also become apathetic. Perhaps this is even more problematic than attempts by people to evade responsibility, since it means that moral awareness itself fades away. Apathy means that the very possibility for acting responsibly (or not) disappears. It means the total absence of anxiety, which is, like its existentialist-absolutist antipode, equally morally disturbing.

4. LACK OF KNOWLEDGE: WHAT CAN WE KNOW?

Even if it were true that we necessarily participate in the consequences of every action, even if we wanted to accept global responsibility, and even if we were capable of doing so, it is often difficult to know our precise contribution.

We receive an enormous amount of information, but information does not necessarily amount to knowledge let alone to practical wisdom. We might know the “facts” – for example about climate change or about international politics, but this kind of knowledge, if any, is a knowing-that. It does not amount to fully experiencing actions and their consequences. It does not amount to what Dewey called know-how and what Dreyfus called ethical expertise (see for example Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1991). Adequate knowledge would require skilled engagement and lived experience, but most of our interactions with information technology is not likely to shape the preconditions for this. We watch the screens, but we remain out of touch. We do not *really* know what is happening at “the other end of the screen.” If this is true, then we can neither achieve the full moral awareness nor the full responsibility McLuhan describes.

Moreover, this also means that to gain the moral knowledge McLuhan projects, requires an active epistemic effort on our part; the “implosion” does not just happen. His descriptions suggest that the *moral* extension that follows extension of the senses is something that happens to us, something that floods our consciousness without effort. But to really know what is going on and especially to really know what your own contribution is, requires epistemic work.

An important barrier to this work is the problem that current information technology tends to create a world adapted to one’s preferences, friends, search history, and so on. This is morally problematic. In so far as we are locked up in this epistemic balloon, we fail to gain knowledge of “the outside,” “the other,” etc. If I only know *MyWorld*, if *iKnow*, then how can I assume *global* responsibility?

Furthermore, there seems to be a “vicious circle of extension” or a “vicious circle of enhancement”: our cognitive capacities are limited, therefore we extend ourselves by means of information technology, but the result of this extension is an even more complex world, which demands further technological enhancement, etc. The result is a perpetual epistemic gap, which hinders the development of the kind of awareness and responsibility McLuhan envisioned.

5. MORAL DISABILITY: WHAT CAN WE DO?

Even if we knew – that is, if we were in touch with – everything that happens in the world and its relation to our actions, even if we achieved the responsibility awareness and the corresponding anxiety McLuhan thinks would result from this knowledge, and even if we accepted that responsibility (no bad faith), concrete commitment and engagement may be blocked by the realization that as individuals we cannot do much, that is, that we can hardly exercise our moral responsibility.

While it may be true that we participate in the consequences of actions, our individual contribution to these actions is limited. Thus, if and in so far as the McLuhanian concept of global responsibility implies not only *awareness* of responsibility but also responsible *action*, it is unclear how this is to happen given the limits to individual agency. Perhaps a different model of action can be used here, but McLuhan does not provide one and it remains unclear how the commitment and participation he envisions can take place in the real world.

For example, we face the problem that power distributions among people are highly unequal. To use the network metaphor: some nodes in the network are “thicker,” which often restricts the power of other nodes. Although McLuhan shows how powerful technologies are in shaping

our lives, he tends to neglect the question regarding power distribution between people. We are all extended, but some are more extended than others. Some of us gain more awareness than others. Some of us have more knowledge and more agency. Some of us can do more than others. We are not part of the global “electronic brain” in exactly the same way (consider also the problem of the so-called “digital gap”).

Moreover, information technology itself may actually promote disengagement and hence contribute to this disability and to the absence of a real public sphere. For example, inspired by Kierkegaard, Dreyfus has argued that the Internet encourages an “aesthetic” life, which allows play and exploration but lacks ethical engagement and commitment (Dreyfus, 2001). Although I disagree with Dreyfus’s old-style Heideggerian analysis of the medium in terms of “the very essence of technology” (p. 1), it is important to further reflect on what the Internet does to embodied presence and commitment, both of which seem necessary conditions of possibility not only of the moral knowledge and awareness (see the previous section), but also of the responsible action promised by McLuhan’s vision.

Note that these power imbalances and lack of commitment are not only a problem for others who need our assistance; from an Aristotelian point of view, this may also restrict our own human flourishing: we are dis-abled in the sense that we cannot (fully) exercise our moral-political potential as humans. If we want that the global “brain” becomes a public sphere, it is important that we can also act – even if this is not an “absolute” or “total” action. Without this ability and this action, *there is nothing that can implode in the first place.*

It seems that in McLuhan’s vision there is a tension between on the one hand a kind of technomysticism, which projects a “global embrace” that resists any further description and prescription, and on the other hand what we could regard as an invitation to investigate and reflect on the “personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences” of new media. In order to understand McLuhan’s ideas, we may need both sides. But for developing an ethics of information technology, it is important to ask what we can do with his ideas and to critically examine them: we want to know how they guide the interpretation and evaluation of the technologies and how they can help us to exercise our responsibility today.

6. CONCLUSION

McLuhan is right that technological changes have moral implications, but these implications are not clear. I have argued that the globalization of moral awareness and responsibility is hindered and constrained by our refusal to take up responsibility and our inability to socially and emotionally cope with the new worlds we continue to create, and by limits to what we can know and what we can do under present conditions, many of which seem to promote disengagement.

Of course we can occupy the old public spaces, but this does not take place “outside” the techno-social sphere of the media. Screaming back at the screens is not enough for moral and political change.

If there is – literally – no ‘automatic’ growth of global awareness, what can we do about it? I can think of at least three kinds of tools.

First, we may want to raise global awareness by using reason: for example, we could adopt a Stoic argument for cosmopolitanism. However, it remains doubtful if we are emotionally equipped for turning this kind of cold “global embrace” into responsible action. We tend to care for the local rather than the global. Our reason may tell us to care globally, but can this “reason” *motivate* without an emotional component?

Second, we may want to use our moral imagination and imagine a unified world. However, again this amounts to a detached way of relating to the world. What is missing is real engagement with that world, and how can we achieve this as screenagers?

Third, we may put our hope in technological developments, as McLuhan seems to have done. As Heidegger famously said: “where the danger is, grows the saving power also” (Heidegger, 1977, p. 34). But I have offered some arguments for doubting this possibility. Maybe information technology *can* enable a different kind of engagement, but it remains to be shown *that* it can do this and *how*. For example, we might think of devices that literally make us feel the pain of others (for example, a device called ‘Wifi-SM’ was mentioned in this conference by de Kerckhove), but then it must be noted that we are already bombarded with the misery of the world but still lack real knowledge of what these people are going through *and* often fail to take responsible action. Furthermore, it may be true that technology can empower people, but it needs to be shown that this amounts to real empowerment rather than, say, being converted into what Heidegger called a “standing reserve”: a growing collection of data, mined and sold by commercial organizations.

We need further reflection on the question under what conditions the technological implosion described by McLuhan can give rise to more moral awareness and responsible action. This requires a systematic analysis of the social, emotional, and technological conditions of this kind of responsibility and a study of people’s concrete experiences within technological practices. Combining philosophy of technology with political philosophy, media studies, and other disciplines, we need to further think about how we can improve our knowledge, experience, and actions as technologically “extended” beings (or: as technological beings) that are part of a global network. How can this electronic environment become our “world” (Heidegger) and “environment” in the first place, and how can we (still) act in a responsible way under these conditions?

Indeed, even if, in one sense, we have *become* global (rather than carrying the globe, as my initial problem formulation had it), this techno-social leap has not (yet?) been followed by a large and significant moral-existential change. Morally, politically, culturally, and psychologically, we are still rather un-extended and local. If moral globalization is desirable at all, it is not obvious *that* it is happening and it remains mysterious how it *can* happen.

To conclude, McLuhan’s vision is attractive but needs substantial development and qualification to the extent that it remains unclear what follows for our moral awareness and responsibility, and to the extent that it disregards the problems identified here. Unless we can deal with these problems, the global moral consciousness and the effective exercise of global responsibility promised by new information technologies are likely to remain a dream of the “electric” age.

REFERENCES

- Dreyfus, H. L., & Dreyfus, S. E. (1991). Towards a Phenomenology of Ethical Expertise. *Human Studies*, 14, 229-250.
- Dreyfus, H. L. (2001). *On the Internet*. London: Routledge.
- Heidegger, M. (1977). The Question Concerning Technology. In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. (W. Lovett, Trans.). New York: Harper and Row.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1944 [1843]). The Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern. In S. Kierkegaard (Ed.), *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (vol. 1). (D. F. Swenson & L. M. Swenson, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- McLuhan, M. (1962). *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: Mentor.
- McLuhan, M., & Fiore, Q. (1967). *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1946). *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*. Paris: Les Editions Nagel. Translated as *Existentialism and Humanism*. (P. Mairet, Trans). London: Methuen, 1948.

The new media of the 21st century have brought about major changes in the manner we experience our surroundings. This is not merely a result of the new capacities such as chronology, access, but also – and mainly – of the content structure inherent to these media, i.e. the manner in which the information contained is structured, presented, and experienced. This new appearance of information may impact the relationship between the use of these technologies on the one hand, and the (human) user's cognitive processes on the other.

In this paper, I shall investigate the manner in which this new approach to information intrinsic to 21st century media technologies may influence human experience and cognition. To this end, two existing conceptions of human cognition will be presented – “language of thought” and “mental models,” respectively – and these will subsequently be applied to the use and experience of (new) technological media.

Therefore, the main research problem to this study is phrased as: *To what extent may 21st century media technologies influence (or determine) human cognition in terms of language of thought and mental models?* In order to address this question, Section 2 serves to provide a brief introduction to and comparison of the aforementioned two positions in cognitive philosophy. Section 3 further elaborates on philosophy of technology and media, focusing first on Marshall McLuhan's thoughts on media, and subsequently applying these to two different aspects of technology use, through articles by Jos de Mul and Valerie Finsen, respectively. In the concluding section of this paper, conclusions are drawn from this investigation, in answer to the main research problem.

2. “LANGUAGE OF THOUGHT” AND “MENTAL MODELS”

There are multiple theories for explaining the processes of human thought. In this section, I shall address two such positions, specifically Jerry Fodor's “language of thought” hypothesis and Kenneth Craik's (posthumously named) “mental model” theory.

¹ A more extensive version of this paper – with the title “Media and Cognition: The Relationship between Thought Structures and Media Structures” – is scheduled to be published in *Frontiers Research in Philosophy and Technology* 17(3), 2013.